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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

REWRITTEN AFRO-AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

BY

ROMITA CHOUDHURY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled 'REWRITTEN AFRO-AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY' submitted by ROMITA CHOUDHURY in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS.

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Date Nov. 26th, 1990

ABSTRACT

Autobiography is a cornerstone of Afro-American literature, beginning with the slave narratives and continuing as one of the most powerful forms of black literary expression. It not only announces the presence of a growing body of literature, distinct from mainstream, traditional white American literary forms (including autobiography), but also demonstrates the potential of this genre to reflect and expand the vista of self-construction. Despite the diverse possibilities of Afro-American autobiography, certain common problems and methods in the exploration of self are discernible. This thesis studies the continuous autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou to find that the self, in both cases, is constructed mainly in relation to its social, political, and cultural determinants. This preoccupation with objective conditions stems primarily from a combination of two factors: first, the need to understand how one's subjectivity has already been constructed by dominant modes of perception and representation and, second, the need to discover authentic modes and contexts of self-representation.

Langston Hughes, concentrating on his experiences as an itinerant black writer, discovers his literary vision only after he has confronted several levels of exclusion and appropriation in the literary world at home and abroad. Maya Angelou, also a traveller, extricates herself, through writing, from imprisoning hegemonic discourses of gender, race, class, and ideology. The redefinition of concepts, which the nature of the self-examinations entails, does not finally result in a complete, unified identity. On the contrary, it situates the respective autobiographers at a new level of freedom and problematizes the

autobiographical process itself.

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I

INTRODUCTION

The autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou are part of a tradition of autobiographical writing beginning with the Afro-American slave narratives and continuing as one of the most powerful forms of black literary expression today. The fact that the majority of black American writers have engaged in the autobiographical process shows the overwhelming concern with identity. Originally this concern stemmed from the experience of cultural dislocation and the ambiguous status in American society of the slave or ex-slave capable of writing an extended account of his life. In the nineteenth century it was especially difficult for even the comparatively free and educated black American to gain access to truthful explanations of his African roots or of his historical background in America. The earliest autobiographies were produced under the unsettling circumstance of the writer having to write his/her life for an audience receptive to only some forms of self-representation. Until recently in the twentieth century most widely available representations of Afro-American people continued to be limited or distorted by the conditionalities of writing the self in a way traditionally acceptable to mainstream Americans. Thus, while black autobiographies begin with the common urge to define identity and make sense of one's experience, they characteristically show a special concern with the socio-political status of the race as a whole, of white perceptions of blackness and of the problems for the individual in situating himself within the black community.

The process of self-exploration in many black autobiographies is carried out, broadly, on two levels: exposure and creation. Through one person's life, the injustices committed on an entire people are laid bare, showing not only the fundamental powerlessness from within which the subject speaks, but also challenging the political and cultural conventions that legitimize those injustices. This aspect of exposure embodies the collective spirit of the race. The other more creative aspect comprises the autobiographer's unique way of constructing identity in relation to the cultural contradictions in society. Through this process, he gives voice to the demands of the community at the same time that he reveals his own, hitherto unspoken, identity, and the image of a particular black person that evolves in the pages of his narrative is important not only to the individual himself but also to the collective black image-building process. Providing a corrective to historical misreadings of Afro-American culture, even this individual process cannot but be social and political in nature.

The sociological bias of black American autobiography is a conscious choice, with the privileging of the "outer" self forming an important methodological tool for most black autobiographers. The emphasis on "external" phenomena -- profession, friends, family, journeys and meetings -- are means of restoring the self from erasure, objectifying it and then recreating it within the black subject's chosen context. It seems that in black autobiography the innermost self of the individual can only be understood by studying its external projections, not as "data" but as directly reflective of his inner life.

The above concerns of black autobiography, centrally the grounding of self in history, are revealed in their incipient stage in slave narratives. A brief examination of some of the problems confronted by the earliest Afro-American autobiographers in trying to establish a personal and collective identity will help us understand the complex origins of the contemporary stream of black autobiography. It will illustrate the basic tension underlying most self-writing from the margins: the desperate urge to belong and an acute need to preserve difference. It will also serve to foreground the need for developing new approaches to the study of black autobiography based on the particular context in which they are written.

The white externality, with its ontological and ideological certainties, could never express the slave narrator's desire to transmute an authentic, unwritten self that existed outside conventional literary discourse structures into an imaginative and complete literary representation. Whereas the white American autobiographer could claim for himself at least two models of self-definition, the precepts of his Puritanic faith and the experience of building a New World, the slave narrator's journey into the past only led to a painful awareness of displacement. For him, there were, in Houston Bakers's words, "scarcely any a priori assumptions to act as stays in his quest for self-definition. He was a man of the diaspora, a displaced person imprisoned by an inhumane system... Instead of the ebullient sense of a new land offering limitless opportunities, the slave, staring into the heart of whiteness around him, must have felt as though he had been flung into existence without a human purpose" (The Journey Back, 30).

Nevertheless, it is within the white man's language, his religious context and his experiments with individuality that the black slave had to give expression to his possibility of self. The compositional problem of slave narratives is a problem of being; it arises from the writer's uncertainty about who he is and where he belongs. The creativeness of such autobiographies should, therefore, be sought in the effort "to establish a voice in which to speak oneself into being, to enter through words the world from which one feels oneself an exile since long before one's personal birth" (Taylor, 342).

In his attempt to realize his dream of transformation from slave to ex-slave, from brute animal to human, the slave narrator undertook the strategy of recounting all the significant events in his life leading up to his enslavement and to his eventual move towards freedom. There is almost a formulaic recurrence of this strategy in slave narratives; even the most outstanding among them display the compulsion of recording the specific social conditions under which they are constructing their selves. First, the narrator tries to prove his normal human existence to a sceptical and hostile white audience by means of identifiable details: "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton in Talbot County, Maryland" (Douglass, 23). This is followed by vivid description of the day to day life of the slave -- the whippings, the starvation, the violent separations from near and dear ones. Then comes the crucial encounter with the power of the word which crystallizes the prospect of freedom through education. Religion and music are enumerated as other actual sources of inspiration in the path to freedom. Traditional Christian metaphors and Biblical

rhetoric are common to many of the narratives. The ending always entails the plunge towards escape or the ecstasy of finding a safe place at last. By situating the birth of his selfhood in the context of the master-slave relationship, the slave voices the social factors involved in his search for full humanity. At the same time, he provides a strong counter-argument to theories of his intrinsic inferiority propounded by advocates of slavery. The slave narrator's treatment of his own life was greatly limited by his eagerness to fulfil the joint tasks of drawing support for the pro-abolitionist circuit and proving himself a sentient, intelligent human being. The latter was most important because through the act of ordering his experiences in a way that would appeal to his white readership the slave narrator hoped to secure his "certificate of humanity."

The constraints under which the slave autobiographer had to work form no part of the twentieth-century Afro-American autobiographer's direct reality; neither is the modern autobiographer concerned with validating his ability to live and function like a full human being. But those constraints and imperatives have become a vital part of his collective identity, investing his search for self with certain significant characteristics derived from the past. The historical condition of bondage, the gradual emergence from it and the cultural and political processes of establishing difference have together given most black autobiographers a unique mode of perceiving the surrounding world. As James Baldwin writes in his "Autobiographical Notes," the most crucial point in his self-understanding occurs with his recognition that he is "a kind of bastard of the West." To him, however, this also means

that "in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the Cathedral of Chatres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude" (Notes of a Native Son, 6). This attitude that Baldwin speaks of is available to the autobiographer even before he initiates the process of self-analysis, functioning as a pre-formed perspective on the cultural context of his writing. Everything that the autobiographer deals with, his choice of events and the degree of emphases on certain aspects, is filtered through his "special attitude." One theorist of autobiography sees this kind of strongly rooted perspective as "a pre-textual level" of self-knowledge derived from "the signs of one's existence that are received from others" (Gunn, 31). Indeed, in the case of the black autobiographer, this means an acute awareness of how he is perceived by the more powerful white majority. As he writes, the autobiographer is conscious of a long history of domination, of seemingly irrevocable distances effected by modes of perception. Therefore, The birth of his sense of identity takes a form of disentanglement, a process of using his own particular attitude to assess those signs of his existence that have determined who he should be and of rewriting himself in accordance with his own personal perspective. While symbolically freeing the autobiographer from historical limitations placed upon his identity, the act of reconstructing the self inevitably engages him solidly in history.

This attitude/perspective has undergone several changes along with changing race relations concomitant with economic and political developments, and each autobiographer must find himself anew. In a

certain way the contradictions confronting the early 20th century "free" black autobiographer can be compared to those of the erstwhile colonial writer who, according to Wole Soyinka,

> occupies two lives, or ... goes through two radically different stages. The first one is his entire colonial experience. The second is coming out of it. Coming out of it, being able now to look back and examine certain things which he used to take for granted (513).

Those systems of difference that in the past seemed unassailable, that controlled the scope and expression of the colonized person's authentic self, become a substantial and complex component of historicity that the autobiographer must deal with. Moreover, the problematics of self-exploration in the post-emancipation era are exacerbated by the conflation of opposing impulses in the autobiographical subject. On the one hand, freedom from outright subjugation inspires the black individual to express his independence from the old repressive ties and to strengthen his connection with the community on the basis of the shared experience of violation. On the other hand, the lifting of discriminatory barriers between people releases the urge for what Todorov calls "a common human identity" ("Race", Writing and Difference, 374). The representation of self through a double-consciousness, that of the ancestral past and that which is evolving through "communication, dialogue, and...comprehension of Otherness" (Todorov, 374), becomes the most pressing issue for Afro-American autobiographers today. Often it results in gaps and silences expressive of the autobiographers' struggles to convey their dichotomized experience of domination and cultural appropriation.

The new possibilities that each generation of black autobiography has to deal with and the accompanying ambiguities infuse narratives with a certain degree of tentativeness. Not only are the modalities of race perception changing, but the autobiographer's own attitudes towards these perceptions are being continually modified. A number of black autobiographies end on an open note. Anne Moody concludes her Coming of Age in Mississippi with a verse from "We Shall Overcome" and her own questioning refrain, "I WONDER, I really WONDER" (384). Langston Hughes ends his first autobiography with a mixture of hope and scepticism: "Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pull. I am still pulling" (335). The lack of finality is present in life as much as in autobiography. It is manifested as an ongoing journey in the autobiographies of writers like W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and others who write themselves again and again. The desire to rewrite stems only partially from the artistic urge to create new, imaginative configurations of experience. The more important purpose for the black autobiographer is to determine his composite attitude towards his milieu without which he cannot re-create his "own" individual life. The collision within himself of several contending forces -- class, community and individual aspirations -- makes the rewriting of autobiography tantamount to a question of survival through self-questioning.

While acknowledging the tentativeness of his situation by the act of rewriting the self, the black autobiographer links himself all the more firmly to the specificities of time and place. In making these constituents of his outer world most important for understanding the

self, he makes a political statement about his method of self-analysis. He sees himself, not as an isolated, unified and singular entity, but as part of larger social movements occurring outside of him. Maya Angelou's comments on approach make quite clear her reasons for rewriting her self:

> When I wrote I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, I wasn't thinking so much about my life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking, what about that time? What were the people around Maya doing? I used the central figure - myself - as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times (Black Women Writers at Work, 6).

Angelou's declared project of reaching her inner self by first capturing the political and cultural atmosphere of the times and then analyzing the nature of her identification with it illustrates her subordination of the unique to the typical, the singular to the plural. However, the search for concrete linkages with peripheral circumstances necessarily ties her to change; she expresses her willingness to re-construct the self under new territories and new times. From one text to another, Angelou's continuous autobiographies demonstrate what Elizabeth Shultz calls "the relentless dynamics of life" (Stone, 56), not in the abstract sense, but through social, political and emotional engagements.

The autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou have inherited several broad concerns of Afro-American autobiography, such as the initiation into powerlessness, the journey towards freedom and the realization that identity can be represented differently, according to one's perspective on social factors of self-construction. Although each

autobiographer employs his/her own method in depicting the particular experience of blackness and its subsequent influence on individual goals, the rewriting process realizes the potential for a renewed sense of subjectivity. The autobiographies are an acknowledgment of the fact that reality itself can be constructed in various ways depending on what one attributes as most significant to the growth of this subjectivity.

Hughes's first autobiography, The Big Sea, shares the basic thrust of slave narratives -- escape. Like the slave narrator, Hughes tries to write himself out of an oppressive environment. Unlike him, Hughes cannot give his escape a concrete direction. He concentrates more on the ambivalences, indecisions and vacillations that characterize this phase of his search for self. Throughout this autobiography, Hughes underplays his sense of belonging. As part of the crew of a trading ship, he identifies most of all with the evanescent quality of the journeys, taking pride in the fact that "we sailors carry nothing but ourselves" (8). This apparent detachment, dramatized in the first section of the autobiography through his act of throwing his books into the sea is, however, challenged by his return to the big sea of literature and his active participation in the literary movements of the time. The state of freedom that Hughes celebrates in this autobiography finds clarity and direction in the rewritten autobiography.

I Wonder as I Wander takes almost completely the documentary mode. The blend of private and public worlds that characterized the first autobiography is almost absent. He tells of no conflict as wrenching as that with his mother, no hatred as intense as that he felt for his father, no clash as far-reaching as his break with "Godmother," no

humiliation as shocking as that caused by Zora Hurston. Yet, in spite of such omissions of clearly personal nature, the autobiography illuminates the developments taking place in the autobiographer's attitude towards his surroundings. We see Hughes's growing concern with his place in history as a black man and as an artist. The prolonged journeys in the rewritten autobiography are not finally journeys away from self, but reflective, by distance and understatement, of the need for more space and a larger community to belong to. At the heart of these excursions is a loneliness as much as there is a love for the diverse colours and rhythms of life.

Angelou's autobiographies follow a chronological pattern: childhood, adolescence and womanhood. The first volume establishes the physical and psychic environment out of which the black child must achieve maturity. The stunting atmosphere of Stamps, her violent initiation into sex and sexual difference, her experience with books, her conscious adoption of pride in blackness and her belief in the folk tradition of her community are all explored here. With the nature of her initiation into blackness and femaleness thus laid out before her, the autobiographer begins her journey in search of freedom and wholeness. The remaining three autobiographies examine the choices she has made and the resulting options she has created for perceiving and imagining herself.

Like Hughes, Angelou moves more and more towards finding herself in history which is no longer peripheral, but central, to her self-discovery. In her understanding of her historical self, Angelou never loses the personal voice, but that personal voice in the rewritten

autobiographies acquires the authority of a historian who is also humane and committed to the cause of freedom. Angelou seeks to answer, more fully, in her final autobiographies, what it means to be black and female in America and Africa. In doing this, she ruthlessly strikes at her own susceptibility to stereotypical images of black womanhood. Angelou, the subject of the autobiographies, says one critic, "had sounded the vastness of a lifetime of loneliness and ascended as the writer. Art became an assertive statement for three generations of an evolving self" (O'Neal, Black Women Writers, 32).

In the autobiographies of both Hughes and Angelou, one is struck by the extent to which their awareness of historical changes influences their awareness of self. The anti-colonial struggles in third-world countries, anti-war and civil rights movements in the developed nations and the consequent shifting of ethical norms, political biases and gender, class and community relationships have all affected their mode of self-exploration. The autobiographers attache most importance to those events which, having exposed them to wider social concerns, cause them to reassess their given attitudes towards the community and their own individuality. Such a reassessment places them, to a large extent, outside the boundaries of familiar contexts, adding to the tentativeness of the narratives and the urge for pursuing the act of rewriting the self.

II

LANGSTON HUGHES: AGAINST TOO MUCH SELF

One of the most striking characteristics of Langston Hughes's autobiographies is their concentration on the external self. Even when Hughes explores the development of his artistic consciousness, he suppresses the revelation of personal joys, pains, successes and failures inevitable to an active literary life. He avoids depicting moments of inner crisis, of turning thoughts into words, of giving expression to a significant emotional strife and generally resists dealing with the socio-political dimensions of his identity on an intimately personal level. Yet, in spite of the particularly selective context of his self-construction and the documentary nature of some of his accounts, Hughes's autobiographies contain a number of fascinating insights on his struggles as a Negro writer to discover his identity. What kind of a writer he wants to be, whom he wants to write for, what his political affinities should be, how he perceives his Negroness are all explored as vital factors in the formation of self, yet none of these are treated as simply a matter of personal choice. In his autobiographies, Hughes ties his race and class consciousness inextricably to his literary achievement and gives precedence to those aspects of his identity that have evolved from his apprehension of history and its demands from him as a black writer. Hence, the texts seek to explore, more than anything else, the birth of his social vision and its applicability to the black literary movement.

In The Big Sea and I Wonder as I Wander, Hughes uses the journey motif as a form of exploring his social self. Like a meandering river

that winds back to itself, Hughes's far-flung journeys bring him closer to what he considers to be the heart of his being. The autobiographies take off from where most slave narratives end -- the starting of the movement towards a full realization of self. Both autobiographies begin with a brief outline of the social causes of his restlessness. The Big Sea shows that anti-Negro "social habit," unemployment and the lack of a sense of belonging in the intellectual life of America comprise some of the essential factors behind Hughes's desperate urge to sail out into the open sea. I Wonder as I Wander also sees him seize the first opportunity to travel to Russia in order to be free from the pressures of the post-depression era. Both narratives deal with the composite of travels as representative of the autobiographer's urge for the "inward voyage." The sea itself, with its vastness and ongoing motion, functions as an emblem of both freedom and alienation. While it provides Hughes with the most appropriate alternative to the restrictions he faces at home, it constantly reminds him of his homelessness.

Like the socio-political circumstances that lead Hughes outward, the pressures of white intellectual perceptions of his subjectivity shape his autobiographical composition of self. Hughes edited The Big Sea a number of times to accommodate the conflicting expectations of his publishers. Carl Van Vechten wanted him to write as elaborately as he could on the Harlem Renaissance, declaring that Hughes was "the last historian of that period who knows anything about it" (Rampersad, vol.1, 376). Blanche Knopf, the other publisher of The Big Sea did not quite approve of Hughes's concentration on the "Harlem Cavalcade," but she finally gave her consent to keeping most of it intact if he would

include more of himself in the autobiography (Rampersad, 1, 376). Hughes complied with his publishers to a great extent in recreating his life. He allotted one significant section of the narrative to the Harlem Renaissance, dealing with it from a historical perspective. He has also devoted another section to what Knopf would call his "personal life", including in it vignettes of his early childhood, his stressful relationship with his father and his general initiation into the invisibility of lower middle-class black life in the 1900s. The section called "The Big Sea" installed between these two halves appears almost as an anomaly and might well mean, literally and symbolically, an escape from other's attempts to define his selfhood for him. The big sea carries the autobiographer away from the scene of contention and lodges him in an entirely new context. Since it is the most creative section of the narrative, it is probably not mere coincidence that the entire volume should be named after it.

Hughes extends the imaginative significance of the journey as a means of creating his own context of self-analysis in the rewritten autobiography I Wonder as I Wander. Built entirely around his incessant movement from country to country and his encounters with people from diverse streams of life, this autobiography reveals a fully formed ideological position on his treatment of self. The justifications for such a position are not rendered through political sermonizing, but through the autobiographer's focus on the real life of the oppressed in various parts of the world. Its polemical content remains subtly imbricated in his hesitant, questioning approach to the actual significance of any event. The self in this autobiography, more than in

the first, can be seen chiefly through connection. Hughes's exposure to various social systems and cultures also influences his search for literary direction in a significant way. It becomes clear to him that he cannot allow race alone to shape his aesthetic vision. He must be alert to every form of domination that he encounters. Since each kind of imprisonment contributes to the human condition in general, Hughes feels compelled to reconstruct his identity on the basis of considering himself as much a citizen of the world as a black son of America.

About the second volume of his autobiography, Hughes wrote to Arna Bontemps in a letter dated April 26, 1956: "I've now cut out all the impersonal stuff down to a running narrative with me in the middle of every page...the kind of intense condensation that, of course, keeps an autobiography from being entirely true, in that nobody's life is pure essence without pulp, waste matter, and rind - which art, of course, throws in the trash can" (Rampersad, vol.II, 259). The touch of irony, even in the conciliatory tone of the words, becomes evident when we consider that the "me" of the autobiography can hardly be called "personal" in the usual sense of the term. It is a particular construction of the autobiographer conceived through his connection with people and shaped by his literary imagination. While Hughes, the individual, is actually present in every sphere of his narration, the formational principles of his identity can be understood only through his interpretation of external events. The nature of Hughes's depiction of life in a variety of social systems marks the difference between this autobiography and other narrator-centred travelogues. Here, the "they-ness" of other cultures and political movements is incorporated in

such a way into the "me-ness" of the narrative as to appear vital to the autobiographer's search for self. Hughes deliberately subdues his separate self in order to establish this interpenetrativeness of the individual and peripheral selves.

In this chapter, we shall look at how Hughes's race, class and literary perspectives develop from one autobiography to another. Since the three aspects are so intricately interwoven, there might occur some repetition of references. However, each aspect will be dealt with mostly separately. Special attention will also be paid to analyzing the ways in which Hughes uses such narrative strategies as juxtaposing, comparing, overlapping and interpolating his episodes. The overall purpose, of course, is to understand the autobiographer's composition of his particular social self that dominates both narratives.

The particular premise of Hughes's race consciousness is set out in The Big Sea by the straightforward statement: "Unfortunately, I am not black... I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother was an olive yellow" (BS, 11). Having thus referred to the subtle nuances of colour in his blood, Hughes undercuts its overall significance to his life by concentrating chiefly upon his blackness. Colour, as a determinant of power-relations, is not a question of individual characteristic to him. His experience shows Hughes that one chooses one's colour on the basis of where one is situated on the social scale, and how one responds to social divisions among people. Writing about Africa, Hughes amplifies this context of self-analysis through his initial sense of difference from and his ultimate identification with the African people. At first, his Kru shipmate from Liberia refuses to

be convinced that Hughes is "not white." He looks at Hughes's "copper-brown skin and straight black hair" and says, "You - white man" (BS, 103). As the word "black" would suggest certain historical forms of difference measured by the economic and political yardstick, so the word "white" suggests to the African all shades of coloured people who "help to carry out the white man's law" (BS, 103). Ironically, the one who is accepted as African disclaims the identification:

> "Don't point at me," George said. "I'm from Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A. And no African blood, nowhere."
> "You black," said the Kru man.
> "I can part my hair," said George, "and it ain't nappy" (BS, 103).

George's jocularity is mixed with a certain undercurrent of seriousness. His desire to amputate his African lineage by proclaiming only his Americanness points to his desire to dissociate himself from the predicament of the colonial subject. He would rather be considered, no matter how illusively, as part of the dominating force rather than the dominated one.

The above incident provides Hughes with an appropriate context in which to explore the ramifications of his race perspective. Unlike George, he cannot deny his heritage, nor does he want to. His deep anger at the decay and violation of this once beautiful land is itself an expression of his solidarity:

> ...Capstan cigarettes in tins, hot beers, quarts of Johnny Walker and stone jugs of gin, barefooted black pilots guiding us into reed-hutted ports, ten-year-old wharf rats offering nightly to take the sailors to see "my sister, two shillings," elephantiasis and swollen bodies under palm trees, white men with guns at their belts, inns and taverns with signs

> up, EUROPEANS ONLY, missionary churches with Negroes in the back seats and the whites who teach Jesus in the front rows... the distant beat of obea drums in the night...and the ships from the white man's land anchored with lights aglow offshore in the starry darkness. Africa! (BS, 106).

Hughes shows by the contrast between his own and George's approach to Africa that, whatever the significance of Africa to the black American, it is firmly tied to the latter's psycho-social identity. It cannot be value-neutral, for the very existence of black Americans is based on a system of values that justified and defended the Western brigandage that has been the lot of the African people.

There is another way in which the visual encounter with Africa affects Hughes. The feeling of homelessness, inevitable to the Afro-American experience and suffusing Hughes's autobiography as well, becomes further accentuated by the loss of the "real" Africa. Having witnessed the wasted body of the motherland, Hughes realizes that there can be no hope of finding solace in her physical proximity. Her paradisal qualities must forever be confined to the visionary realm of experience. Hughes, like many a slave who has dreamed of Africa, and many a writer who has imagined her as the source of his pride in blackness, finds that Africa can only be discovered by acknowledging its pastness. Like the Burutu moon that Hughes recreates with such powerful tangibility, Africa remains with him "like a gold ripe fruit in heaven, too sweet for the taste of man" (BS, 120).

Hughes's visit to Africa inculcates a deep sense of loss in him. After his actual encounter with the misery of the motherland, he finds

that he can no longer celebrate the bitter-sweet elements of blackness without being painfully aware of the political situation in Africa. Hughes makes his realization all the more convincing by inserting a short compositional history of the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" before the section on Africa. He, thus, juxtaposes the mellowness of his youthful version of Africa with the harsh, informed one of the present. In The Big Sea Hughes recalls how once, while travelling by train to Texas, he had to cross the Mississippi river, and how this made him reflect upon what it had meant for a slave "to be sold down the river." And, as if to mitigate the pain of such memories, he remembers that there are other rivers, other sources of his identity than the past of bondage; the urge to re-appropriate the long lost glory manifested itself in an idyllic beautification of the historical self:

> I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
> went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
> bosom turn all golden in the sunset
> (BS, 55).

The convergence of so many sources of selfhood in the soul of the poet without any one of them losing its separate significance was a beautiful idea. But, in order to be transformed into reality, the idea would have to be grounded in the present general degradation of the African situation which he can no longer ignore. In recognizing that his nostalgic reconstructions of a collective past have been defeated by facts, Hughes takes the necessary step towards affirming the need for a

rational political vision to guide him in his search for his origins.

The Harlem Renaissance also provides Hughes with a new impetus to define his attitude towards blackness and the concept of Africa. Being a period of unprecedented complexity, especially with regard to race relations in America, it brings to the fore of the political and cultural scene numerous conflicting tendencies pertaining to the future of blacks in America. While white critics and publishers were "discovering" black artists, the Jim Crow code of discrimination was being further elaborated. White people were flooding Harlem cabarets, and black club-owners were compromising their traditional forms of entertainment to please monied white customers. Even as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People was drawing more members towards participation in the national life of America, Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement was gaining ground. While acknowledging the positive effects of this immense upheaval on his literary career, Hughes also reveals the dangers of manipulation inherent in a situation where black writers are still largely dependent on white liberal support for adequate publicity and readership. Hughes's exposure to such danger, being of a personal nature, has serious physical and psychological repercussions on him. The negativity of his experience is, however, superseded by its educative value because it awakens him to the magnitude of his responsibility as a black writer to promote truthful images of his community and culture.

The source of Hughes's painful awakening is his wealthy white patron whom he loved and respected a great deal. After a period of continued support, she chooses to disapprove of his work because it does

not display "the intuitions of the primitive" (BS, 325). Hughes is outraged at this. Considering the primitivistic elements in the works of some well-known white intellectuals of the time, such as Vachel Lindsay, Gertrude Stein, Van Vechten and others, the old lady's belief in the intrinsic primitivism of the black race is hardly surprising. Blackness for liberal white writers of the 1920s and 30s was a composite of images forged from the basic assumption that Africa is a wild territory and its people indomitably physical, impulsive and bloodthirsty. Ironically, these are also the very images that, refined into a palatable version of primitivism, were meant to provide an antidote to the mechanization of American life. For the politically conscious black artists, these representations of blackness were as good as "zero image," which does not mean a lack of image but a complex of images reflecting white conceptions of reality -- Black and White (Gerald, Black Aesthetics, 373). It is therefore not his patron's imposition on him to "be primitive" that shocks Hughes so much as the resoluteness with which she demands his conformity to her opinions of blackness. While repudiating her demands of him, Hughes recognizes the "technique of power" she holds; she can divest him, dependent as he is on her financial support, of the authentic depths of his creativity. Above all, Hughes realizes that she is not even open to possible differences between an African and an Afro-American. Even if it is granted that primitivism and Africa go together, to expect an American Negro to possess the same cultural values as an African Negro only means negating the latter's unique history. As Hughes himself declares vehemently, although he "had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa," he most definitely "was not Africa" (BS, 325). This experience makes clear to Hughes that

blacks alone can be the authors of their images, myths and peoplehood. From the fractured and fragmented form of their personal and communal history, from the daily casualties of the racial struggle, new and positive images of black people must be reconstructed. Only then can "zero image" be really destroyed.

As a writer, the choice that Hughes makes of building positive and real images of Afro-American life has an immense bearing on his creative principles. In his essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in 1927, around the time of his break with his patron, Hughes not only upholds the authentic creation of black writers, musicians and painters, but declares, quite unequivocally, that the best of all Negro art will spring from the common black people who "will give the world its truly great Negro artist." They are the ones who "still hold their individuality in the face of American standardization" (Gayle, 177). In other words, to Hughes, keeping alive the Negro that actually lives and breathes in the hearts of black people, rather than in the speculations and fantasies of white liberals, is the foremost task of the black artist. The essay also addresses itself to those black intellectuals who cannot decide whether to be American or to be a Negro:

> ...I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the coloured artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.
>
> Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues

> penetrate the closed ears of the coloured near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle-class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If coloured people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves (180-81).

Hughes reveals a distrust of those critical Negro minds that, because of their appreciation of nineteenth and twentieth-century Western classics, cannot find anything really outstanding or valuable in black literature. He detects an implicit acquiescence to a kind of analysis that measures Afro-American art by the "universal" criteria of Western criticism. Hughes directs black writers and critics to the great wealth of unused material in black life waiting to be turned into art. He attempts to convince the aspiring black artist that "without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their 'white' culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish [him] with a lifetime of creative work... To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, become ironic laughter mixed with tears" (Hughes, The Black Aesthetic, 177). For Hughes, the most difficult task in the

preservation of black culture is that of liberating black aesthetics from white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of its possibilities.

Although Hughes does not elaborate upon the exact nature of the image-making process in his autobiography, he does trace the theoretical foundation of his race perspective through the crucial stages of its development. In The Big Sea, we see him move from relative detachment to acknowledgment of his responsibility in using his artistic talents to further the cultural expressions of his race. Along with this sense of his social role, comes the need to understand where his own sympathies lie. Hughes decides that he cannot trust the "better class" of coloured people, who had so internalized the class/race/power correlations of American capitalism that, in order to distinguish themselves as "people of culture," they "drew rigid class and colour lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges" (206). For Hughes then, genuine promotion of black aesthetics would mean drawing in the common people. One of Hughes's major disappointments with the Harlem Renaissance is that it has not reached the ordinary Negroes: "They did not know what it was and even if they did, it hadn't raised their wages any" (BS, 228). These are sure indications of Hughes's preference for the working class as subject matter and audience. His choice stems from his knowledge that among upper class blacks there is usually an aspiration to material power as a means of effecting an equalization between the races. This makes them unfit to be custodians of authentic black culture. Those whose survival depends on sustaining black music,

folklore, spirituals and revivals, those who refurbish it everyday with their struggles of eking out an existence are its true representatives.

The fundamental concepts underlying Hughes's race perspective gain practical significance and complexity through his Eastern travels. Everywhere that he journeys -- to the far South of Samarkhand, Japan and China -- Hughes finds some form of colour existing either in the shape of class or race or nationality. In the section called "Colour Around the Globe," Hughes shows that colour bars function as an extra-legal means of ensuring economic domination by one people over another. Put in another way, racial discrimination neither begins nor survives on misconception of another's worth; it is a conscious, well-orchestrated mechanism for keeping the oppressed doubtful of their significance. Just as in The Big Sea Hughes explores through his depictions of Africa, Washington's Seventh Street and the intellectual whirlpool of the Harlem Renaissance his affinity with the common people, so he aligns himself during his second set of travels with those who are situated furthest from the centres of power. Hughes finds himself more fully by recognizing within himself this deep-seated urge to take up the cause of those who are deprived of their full selfhood. The second autobiography, like many of his radical literary works, is a political act. It gives voice to those who are made voiceless by the force of political power.

In I Wonder as I Wander, Hughes is able to put together a number of experiences to convey the global impact of racism. Its tentacles are spread far and wide. In Japan, for instance, Korean subjects "were in somewhat the position as Negroes in the United States in relation to newspaper coverage. Seldom was anything good about Koreans mentioned,

but if one committed a crime, it was headlined with a racial identification tag included" (WW, 276). Hughes's own colour is brought to bear upon his perceptions of a world that is divided into black and white solely for the purpose of keeping a certain social system of difference in operation. China provides him with the most blatant proof of the synonymity of racial subjugation and economic power. There, the freedom of the majority is usurped without hesitation by the minority International Settlement. Hughes notes being "constantly amazed in Shanghai at the impudence of white foreigners in drawing a colour line against the Chinese in China itself" (WW, 249). In Russia, members of the upper white classes continue to resist a regime that permitted wild, unwashed and coloured nomads from the desert access to every facility in the country. Hughes pities the rebels "just as [his] slave grandparents must have been sorry for certain of the gentler aristocrats of the South when the Yankees came" (WW, 147). The rewritten autobiography then aims at making certain viable connections between the autobiographer's racial, political and literary identities. In fact, Hughes seems to find himself better equipped, by virtue of his initiation into "difference" through life, for interpreting most struggles waged behind the veil of homogeneity.

During his travels, Hughes learns two very significant things about his racial identity. The first is that for those who colonize other people -- a whole country, or a section of the population -- he will seem a "natural" enemy. As a victim himself of a discriminatory system and a writer at that, he will be considered a potential ally of radical nationalists. The world-wide chain of repressive social systems

inexorably binds him to the margins. The suspicions of the Japanese police and their interrogation of Hughes is a case in point. It is very important for them to gauge accurately Hughes's political affiliation precisely because he is black:

> And why were the Japanese police interested to find out what American writers I might know at home? They even asked me about Floyd Dell. At that time I had not met any of the really famous American leftist writers...
>
> "Why are you so interested in American writers?" I asked.
>
> "We wish to know more about them," said the bright young officer -- Then, changing the subject, he said, "Negroes in America must know that Japan is the strongest of the nations in the East, do they not?"
>
> "Of course," I said(WW, 269).

Hughes also learns that he will indeed be estranged forever at home and abroad because of the fact that he considers himself black and American. He can never share the ambivalences of a Conrad or a Forster towards the colonial experience. He feels neither guilt nor impotence because while his country contributes openly or obliquely to oppression in several parts of the world, he is himself like a colonial at home. Therefore, the European and American symbols of power in China seem far more forbidding to him than the rowdiest of public places in native localities. Again and again, Hughes is reminded he lacks a real home. The personal strain in the rewritten autobiography, although submerged in a plethora of political intrigues, becomes visible here. Logically, in view of the socio-political realities of his own life, he aligns himself with the oppressed, attempting to acquire a sense of belonging, a sense of identification. Hughes expresses his over-arching connection

with this wide, heterogeneous, and amorphous section of people he considers his own by writing their story as part of his own.

The Negroness of Hughes's perspective on everything he witnesses is further confirmed by his response to Russia. This land of the working-class revolution has many limitations and Hughes seems aware of them all. But his regard for the positive changes that have taken place under the new system of government far exceeds his criticism of its disadvantages. So deeply does Hughes believe in the inter-dependability of race and class exploitaton that the signs of racial equality in Russia make him feel that the other needs of justice and freedom would surely be met. Furthermore, along with racism, religious fanaticism and begging had been rigorously curtailed. To the young Negro poet from America, these were the real indexes of progress:

> Something hard and young in me could not help thinking, now had come the hour of those from the desert, who once had to work seven years for the beys in order to afford a wrinkled worn-out wife that some richer man had first enjoyed, in the days when women were bought and sold like cattle. Today women are free, and men, too, for now has come the time of those who formerly had to till the overlord's vast acres in return for the use of just a little water to irrigate a single barren acre of their own. The overlords have fled, along with the Emirs, the Khans and the Tzarist officers. Now it is the turn of those who in former days had to beg of the Cossacks, "Please, master! No more lashes, please! White master, no more! Please!" (WW, 147)

What makes Hughes particularly optimistic is the spirit of change that he sees everywhere in favour of the deprived ones. Whereas Arthur Koestler, with whom Hughes makes several trips to the remote interiors of Samarkhand, sees only the feudal vestiges of a "primitive" land,

Hughes sees in the new Russia "a coloured land moving into orbits hitherto reserved for whites" (WW, 116). These are circumstances in which he cannot take the middle path. Unlike Koestler, who could not understand that "even with eternal grime and continued famines, racial freedom was sweeter than the lack of it," Hughes's class and racial alignments combine to settle his priorities for him. Accordingly he writes, "If, rather than a Negro, I had been a Russian of the old school...or a famous Berlin journalist like Koestler, or a comfortable white American tourist affording twenty dollars a day for a room, or a highly-skilled foreign engineer...or a pregnant woman with romantic illusions, maybe I would have become quickly disillusioned, too, and found nothing good to say about a backward people who had come so far to so little" (WW, 212).

Tracing some of the significant developments in Hughes's race perspective that appear in his rewritten autobiography, one should first note that whereas in The Big Sea his treatment of race is limited to his own experiences and hence firmly linked to blackness, in I Wonder as I Wander it incorporates numerous categories of colour. Moreover, in the first autobiography, Hughes's treatment of the many contours of blackness is infused with the restless and vulnerable sensibility of his younger self. With I Wonder as I Wander, we have a more precise and convinced mind as the focus of the narrative. The political direction of the second autobiography is projected by a strong narratorial presence that makes certain demarcations clear at the outset. In the first account of this volume, which is about his visit to the sunny island of Haiti, Hughes writes chiefly about "the people without shoes." Likewise,

writing next about his trip to the South, reading poetry to students, workers, domestics and sharecroppers, Hughes concentrates primarily on his actual encounter with ordinary black people. In these ways, Hughes equates colour with class and continues to build upon this basic approach through the rest of the autobiography.

Similar developments take place with Hughes's literary orientation. In The Big Sea, Hughes's use of other's voices much more than his own to analyze the direction he himself is taking suggests both his own uncertainty and the relational construct of his artistic principles. Hughes was well aware from the beginning of his career that he was not writing in a vacuum. The Harlem Renaissance was declaring the birth of a new generation relatively free from the old tradition of white domination. There were already various discernible trends in black American literature. But would all these streams come together to form one big powerful new wave? What should the new, free literature consist of? Where are its strongest roots? These questions were on the minds of most black writers. Hughes attempts to arrive at some answers through the stories of Wallace Thurman and Jean Toomer.

"Harlem Literati" (BS, 233-241) and "Gurdieff in Harlem" (BS, 241-243), two segments of the Black Renaissance section, are succinct and powerful depictions of the actual manifestations of the race/ideology/literature discourse. Wallace Thurman had written a novel, The Blacker the Berry, a play, Harlem and a study of the bohemian element of Harlem's literary and artistic life, Infants of the Spring. All these works are described by Hughes as "important," "compelling" and "superb" (BS, 235). Unfortunately, Thurman is discontented:

> ...none of these things pleased Wallace Thurman. He wanted to be a very great writer, like Gorki or Thomas Mann, and he felt that he was merely a journalistic writer. His critical mind, comparing his pages to the thousands of other pages he had read, by Proust, Melville, Tolstoy, Galsworthy, Dostoyevski, Henry James, Sainte-Beauve, Taine, Anatole France, found his own pages vastly wanting. So he contented himself by writing a great deal for money, laughing bitterly at his fabulously concocted "true stories," creating two bad motion pictures of the "Adults Only" type for Hollywood, drinking more and more gin, and then threatening to jump out of windows at people's parties and kill himself (BS, 235).

The sources of Thurman's discontentment, although not spelled out by Hughes, seem to lie in Thurman's judgment of what comprises valuable literature, what makes a "great writer," what critical practices he would like to see employed in the interpretation of his works and his understanding of the responsibility of the artist. All these attributes of Thurman's eventual failure as a conscious and bold writer are connected, directly and indirectly, with his choice of audience.

Thurman's avowal of Gorki's and Mann's superiority over him as writers is not as simple as a young, experimental novelist's reverence for good literature and his anguished acknowledgment that he still has a long way to go before he can do justice to his own material. It is an opinion based on the distinction he makes between "journalistic writing" and literature proper. Thurman classifies the novel and the play he has himself written as non-literature and obviously belonging to an inferior category. By doing this, Thurman is echoing some of the commonest labels attached to black literature, namely, that it is "realistic", "sociologically revealing", "naturalistic", "moving" and "folksy" -- in

short, non-intellectual. Such categorizations have perpetuated an elitist refusal to consider honest black literature as art. Many promising writers, like Thurman, have foundered against this rock of non-recognition and seen their creativity dry up. Hughes's criticism of Thurman as a talented, though misdirected, writer has a significant bearing on his own search for literary goals because Thurman's story holds a cautionary value both for himself and other potential writers who might underestimate the difficulty of promoting a whole separate tradition of writing. For Hughes, the limitations and dangers of the Harlem Renaissance were embedded in its most positive gesture: the general appreciation of the Negro. It was a paradoxical gesture in that while it brought Negro art and culture to the fore, it also carried in its wake the impetus to sweep away in one massive wave all differences between the races. Thurman probably did not know at what point he had stopped wanting to be a Negro writer and begun aspiring to be a raceless one, demonstrating exactly the outcome of depending on white mainstream cultural mood to reflect the importance of the Afro-American stream of cultural expression.

The segment on Jean Toomer, further illustrating the loss of inspiration among Afro-American writers, clarifies Hughes's own position on the choice of audience. Hughes attributes Toomer's inability to write another book after Cane to his rupture with his people. In Toomer's refusal to permit his poems for inclusion in an anthology of Negro Verse for fear of narrowing his identity, Hughes sees a symptom of the writer's future dispersion of identity culminating in the estrangement from his people and the termination of his writing career. Hughes ends

his story about Toomer by questioning the political and aesthetical choices of the talented writer of "the beautiful book of prose and verse." Where does he belong now?

> With Dubose Heyward and Julia Peterkins? Or with Claude Mckay and Countee Cullen? Nobody knew exactly, it being a case of black blood and white blood having met and the individual deciding, after Paris and Gurdieff, to be nearly American.
>
> One can't blame him for that. Certainly nobody in Harlem could afford to pay for Gurdieff. And very few there have evolved souls.
>
> ...Harlem is sorry he stopped writing. He was a fine American writer. But when we get as democratic in America as we pretend we are on days when we wish to shame Hitler, nobody will bother much about anyone else's race anyway. Why should Mr. Toomer live in Harlem if he doesn't care to? Democracy is democracy, isn't it? (BS, 242-43).

Like Thurman, Toomer was unable to accept the constriction of readership and recognition that inevitably follow the determination to translate a marginalized racial experience into art within the cultural order of the dominant majority. Toomer's cosmopolitanism and his spiritual experiments suggest his desperation to escape the pressures of the black literary world. His vacillation is a painful memory for Hughes because it exemplifies the cost of being American, especially in terms of preserving cultural wholeness. This is a cost that some Afro-American writers have paid ever since they have begun to write themselves into being in a world that offered them basically two options: assimilation or erasure. Black artists found that in order to be heard, their literary creations would somehow have to find a corner inside the formidable edifice of the Western tradition. Otherwise, there was the

constant risk of being wiped away.

It is not until I Wonder as I Wander that Hughes confronts directly the lessons learnt from the Harlem Renaissance. In this autobiography, he links his choice of audience to "truth" and "authenticity" so as to leave no doubt about his political perspective. Hughes wants to write for the common people in such a way that they will find his writing truly representative of their experiences. But he is no longer satisfied just to mirror the surface lives of common people; he wants also to expose the deeper systems of power that control them. In I Wonder as I Wander, he accepts the challenge of writing "real" Negro literature and still being recognized as an artist:

> There was one other dilemma - how to make a living from the kind of writing I wanted to do. I did not want to write for the pulps, or turn out fake "true" stories to sell under anonymous names as Wallace Thurman did. I did not want to bat out slick non-Negro short stories in competition with a thousand other commercial writers trying to make The Saturday Evening Post. I wanted to write seriously and as well as I know about the Negro people, and make that kind of writing earn me a living (WW, 5).

Hughes is conscious of the fact that writing seriously for the masses involves the risk of turning literature into a political platform, but he is also aware that his writing must give voice to the wrath, hopes and doubts of his audience to be truly representative. That Hughes is ready to contend with the risks of over-politicization of his art rather than giving up his choice of audience is made most explicit by his appreciation of the evolving art in Russia:

> To me as a writer, it was especially interesting to observe how art of all sorts -- writing,

> painting, the theatre -- was being utilized as a weapon against the evils of the past. To be sure, art, put to such use, often degenerated into propaganda. But propaganda in talented hands took on dramatic dimensions (WW, 173).

Plainly, Hughes is extrapolating the developments in the Russian aesthetic scene on to the possibilities for Afro-American art. But while Hughes claims moral and cultural allegiance to the black masses, he also comes to understand from the revolutionary cultural community of Russia that the "masses" do not constitute a homogeneous entity. Thus, there is place in the heart of ordinary Russian people for both Boris Pasternak who "would not, or could not, write political poetry" and Vladimir Mayakovsky, "the mad surrealist poet of the revolution" (WW, 197).

In The Big Sea, Hughes celebrates the black spirit of survival and acknowledges the lasting inspiration gained from the indomitable courage and endurance with which common black people cope with their daily struggles. However, the first autobiography tends to romanticize those very afflictions which make ordinary folk produce their soul-stirring music and lyrics. In his anxiety to identify with such people and render their struggles as marks of dignity, Hughes reiterates several times his own experience of the relation between pain and art. He claims to write best when he is saddest. Rewriting his autobiography almost seventeen years later, Hughes aims straight at demystifying the bald realities of class difference. In I Wonder as I Wander, the facts of hardship signify more than abstract human glory in wretchedness; here, he looks deep into the sources of real contradictions that effect the domination of one people by another.

The second autobiography, by its content and form, establishes order upon the seeming disorder in the life of the oppressed. Hughes counteracts the "hair raising stories" of American and English journalists about Shanghai by writing his own story about it:

> Incredible Shanghai! Where the raw materials of the narcotics trade flowed over the Bund to the Western world, child slaves were sold to factories, and students imprisoned for harbouring "dangerous thoughts" against Chiang Kai-Shek; on Nanking Road, Bubbling Road and other brilliantly lighted streets, at evening, in the cafes and gambling houses mah-jongg chips rattled like locust pods in a high wind. In luxurious bath houses, singing crickets in cages and musical frogs croaked for the amusement of the bathers...while barbed-wire barricades went up at the gates and Japanese patrols in ever increasing numbers stalked the city, the foreign newspapermen predicted, "It won't be long until the Japs take over" (WW, 250).

Hughes's description of Shanghai, despite the collection of allegorical images, shows his determination to overcome the impersonal gaze of the tourist. He succeeds in penetrating the outer veil of confusion to expose the signs of an ongoing battle where the opponents cannot not always be recognized. Even amid the widely incongruous images of barbarity, exoticism, resistance and persecution, it is not difficult to see the indigent population of China as the real victims of colonialism.

Ironically, Hughes's growing understanding of the common people accompanies his awareness of the limits of language in general. The wide range of his experiences makes him all the more conscious that his writing may not do justice to the breadth of possibilities within them. One of the reasons for the restrained, documentary tone of the rewritten autobiography may well be Hughes's sense of the inadequacy of language

to convey the actual intensities of lived life:

> In the last few years I had been all around the embattled world and I had seen people walking tightropes everywhere - the tightrope of colour in Alabama, the tightrope of transition in the Soviet Union, the tightrope of repression in Japan, the tightrope of the fear of war in France and of the war itself in China and in Spain - and myself everywhere in my tightrope of words (WW, 400).

There is another side to Hughes's sense of the reductive quality of language. He finds that, when a writer records real events, comments upon them, and distils from his own emotions a personal interpretation, the impact of the words goes far beyond the confines of his individual self. Hughes, therefore, qualifies many of his subjective comments of people or situations by bifurcating subjectivity into the narrating and the participating. Before making a statement about Koestler, Hughes undercuts the certitude of his opinion by saying that if he were "a socio-literary historian," he would have said that "in 1932 were Koestler's crossroads" (WW, 143). Similarly, writing about the Spanish Civil War, Hughes affirms several times that he is only a writer, not a fighter. Through these qualifications, Hughes expresses his struggle with effecting a balance between language and perspective. While he needs the sharpness of words to clarify his attitudes, he also fears entrapment by the ideological component of language.

Hughes's treatment of his emotional experiences reveals a tension between the evocative and distancing qualities of language. When his personal feelings are not to be found under a weight of anecdotes or oblique reveries, they are most often rendered through poetry. For instance, he ends his account of his harrassment by the Japanese police

not with an articulation of grief and embarrassment but with an excerpt from a newspaper report on the subject (WW, 276); similarly, in his description of his separation from Mary, an English-African girl he had met and fallen in love with in Paris, he says very little about his feelings for her. His inexpressiveness shows, however, a gap between happenings and accounts, fact and reality: I "thought a lot about Mary after she went away. Then after a while, I didn't think about her so much" (BS, 170). Later, Hughes writes a poem for her called "The Breath of a Rose". The pictures drawn by the narratives are distinct and unforgettable, but the man behind them remains elusive. One must keep in mind, while analyzing Hughes's deliberate withdrawal from revealing too much about his personal self, that the basic premise of his autobiographical journey constitutes the precedence of the outer self over the inner.

Hughes's distancing strategy is considered by George E. Kent to be the outcome of an approach to reality consistent with "the is-ness of folk vision and tradition - life is lived from day to day and confronted by plans whose going astray may evoke the face twisted in pain or the mouth open in laughter. The triumph is in holding fast to dreams and maintaining, if only momentarily, the spirit of the self" (Langston Hughes: Black Genius, 188). Kent's view of Hughes's reticence seems most applicable to the composite of journeys depicted in the first volume of autobiography. Throughout Hughes's journeys, he moves from one casual employment to another; he meets people and grows attached to them but never in an enduring way. Hence, Hughes's travels reflect an is-ness combined with abandonment, fragmentation and incompleteness. The

journeys suggest a certain sense of lostness, which Hughes handles with characteristic irony. For example, when he appears to trivialize the sum of his experiences by parallelling it to the sum of his pecuniary balances, what he actually wants to achieve is a combination of the pathetic and the ludicrous in his predicament:

> On the way across the Atlantic, I washed the Chief Mate's shirt and he gave me a quarter, the first American money I had seen in a long time. When we docked early on Nov. 24th down at the tip of Manhattan Island, I took a nickel of that quarter and rode the subway to Harlem.
>
> Ten months before, I had got to Paris with seven dollars. I had been in France, Italy, and Spain. And after the Grand Tour of the Mediterranean, I came home with a quarter, so my first European trip cost me exactly six dollars and seventy-five cents!
>
> In Harlem I bought a packet of cigarettes and still had a nickel left (BS, 201).

Hughes makes very little of his own literary work during this time and the chapter immediately following the one above, called "Washington Society," begins with this ironic statement: "Besides the quarter, I landed with a few poems" (BS, 201). This dismissiveness not only avoids excessive self-revelation and discourages simplistic connections between experience and poetry, but also makes a point about the circularity and indirection in his life. No matter that he has visited distant lands, seen and learnt much, no matter that he has written a number of poems; he has still returned to a home where he could only get a job in a wet wash laundry, where he "could not get a cup of coffee on a cold day" in any white restaurant, where "cultured" Negroes warned his mother before-hand not to come to a dinner organized in honour of the "New Negro" writers because she did not possess an evening gown, where

despite grandiloquent praises of his grandfather's and his own achievements, nobody would offer him a scholarship so that he might continue his studies. The homecoming is very nearly another painful exile and, characteristically, Hughes laughs to stop himself from crying.

In the rewritten autobiography, such self-directed laughter is replaced by a more ideological perspective on reality. Interpreting this development through crucial changes in his poetic consciousness, Hughes clearly stands against allowing his art to transcend reality. For, although, as Lorca has said, "The poem, the song, the picture is only water drawn from the well of the people," it must also be returned to them "in a cup of beauty so that they may drink -- and in drinking understand themselves" (WW, 387). The beautification of experience in art is fully dependent on the process by which the autobiographer makes sense of the apparent disorder and chaos of his experiences so that readers may gain an understanding of their lives from it. Hughes never sees art as an ordinary means of survival; throughout his autobiographies, he demonstrates his desire to know and understand as absolutely necessary to the sincerity of his purpose.

I Wonder as I Wander concentrates on the actual travels and their influences upon the autobiographer. The approach to events, situations and people is less symbolic than in the The Big Sea and more directly self-revelatory. Hughes produces this effect by constantly weighing and balancing the different aspects of his identity in an effort to create a centre, and on the structural level, the pitch of activity and the pace of movement give the impression of a unity achieved somehow on the basis

that the nucleus, that is the traveller, remaining one and the same Langston Hughes. Things are happening all around him. Things are happening to him. Examining Hughes's reactions, however, one finds that this apparently unchanging self is not essence but process. It is being continually re-activated and re-positioned by the multiple discourses of culture and politics. Hughes is in motion himself and is never quite the same person in Bokhara as in Tashkent, or in China as in Japan.

In spite of the major developments in Hughes's political and literary vision as revealed in his second autobiography, the two narratives are bound together by some important unifying elements, the fundamental one among them being Hughes's attitude towards his political and cultural surroundings. Although he is more conscious of the imperatives of class and race in I Wonder as I Wander, his affiliation with the under-privileged and his belief in this connection as his primary creative source remain the same. This attitude, gradually developed throughout the autobiographies, becomes one of the distinctive features common to both books. Moreover, his casual style, his unpretentiousness about his own achievements and his quiet sense of humour add to the unity of the narratives.

In addition to the journey motif and the concentration on externals already discussed, both autobiographies rely heavily on the device of supplying many titles that comment on the text. While these may at first appear to be simply referential, most, considered closely, suggest insight into the segments they announce, and thus help to compensate for Hughes's reticence about meaning. For example, the title "Literary Quarrel," applied to the section dealing with Hughes's

differences with Zora Neale Hurston, is clearly ironic since the actual nature of the quarrel is far from literary. The fact that it takes place between two intellectuals does not free it from pettiness. Hughes himself makes no directly derogatory comment about Hurston, but the title of his chapter makes it a forceful criticism of her eccentricity, a quality usually forgiven in charismatic people, especially artists. Similarly, "Watermelon from Yangtze" not only exposes the lies and hypocrisy of the colonists who attribute the economic conditions of that nation to the essential inferiority of the race, but the title, like the fruit itself, emphasizes the authentic beauty of China which will continue to survive in the face of repression. The titles give the narratives a wider contextual and interpretative space. The autobiographer's attitudes and emotional involvement are also brought into focus in this particular manner to create, through cumulative effect, a scaffold for the multiple segments of the narratives.

Langston Hughes's autobiographies, like his poetic and dramatic works, are experimental. He tells the story of his life mainly through the stories of others. His journeys are sequential and far-flung, but flashbacks and swift re-creations of past events seem somehow to give the impression that he is close to home. In fact, Hughes always does return. Near the end of the second autobiography, Hughes remarks, "That's one nice thing about America...I can always go home - even when I don't want to" (WW, 404). What he means, in addition to the surface reference to the political turmoil in Europe during the 1930's, is that he cannot escape his American Negro background through exile. The pain of invisibility that his ironic comment about returning to America

implies is endured by the discovery of his own world which, he repeats towards the end of the second autobiography, "won't end" (WW, 405). As the autobiographies demonstrate, this world can hardly be defined by geographical boundaries, by political dogma or even by colour. What insights Hughes gains into identity, what he learns about his artistic convictions launch him at the threshold of yet another stage in the process of self-exploration. Having constructed a self virtually through ceaseless wandering, flight and return, Hughes has attested the process more than the end which does indeed see him ever more certain of who he is. True to his method, he has never stood back and wondered, but wondering, engaged himself with the sea of people and sought to enrich himself through its many faces.

III

MAYA ANGELOU: THE PERIPHERAL VISION

It is remarkable that the autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou, so different in terms of the specific autobiographical presence in them, are similar in several respects. Angelou, like Hughes, concentrates on the social determinants of her identity-formation. In the four volumes of her autobiography she continually reconstructs her self with reference to people, places and events that form a vital part of her subjectivity. The interfusion of public and private worlds or the representation of the private through the public, so pronounced in Hughes's narratives, is also a significant feature of Angelou's method of self-exploration. Angelou also tries to capture the self from the impulses to escape from familiar surroundings, and, like Hughes, she realizes the pain of ultimate homelessness. During her childhood and adolescent years, she moves back and forth several times between Stamps, where she is brought up, and San Francisco, where her mother lives. Running away from both homes, she seeks sanctuary with her father in Mexico. Later, as member of a touring opera company, she travels extensively all over Europe. Further, as Mrs. Make, wife of the revolutionary South African leader, she lives for a while in Egypt. Separated from him, she moves on to Ghana. Yet, like Hughes, Angelou is interested less in the journeys themselves than in the way the corresponding expansion of the contours of experience shape and reflect her personal growth. Angelou depicts the process of her maturation as directly connected with the different social and cultural conditions in which she finds herself and reveals a self constructed mainly from her

reactions to her changing surroundings.

There are also some marked dissimilarities in the focus of the two sets of rewritten narratives. Whereas Hughes renders the developments in his understanding of self exclusively through his subjective responses to political phenomena, Angelou makes her autobiographies correlate directly to separate stages in the chronology of her own life: childhood, adolescence, youth and middle age. Secondly, the emphasis of both autobiographers on the outer self is effected differently. While Hughes's political orientation leads to his conscious overshadowing of personal material, in Angelou's self-study the concern with externality results in a rift between her public and private selves. Thirdly, while Hughes, being as reticent as he is on subjects of sex and sexuality, refrains from analyzing the influence of gendered differences in his life, Angelou's autobiographical voice aims at sharpening the gendered context of her particular perspective on femaleness. She clarifies this context by focussing to a large extent on her search for love and commitment and on her attempts to explain her rediscovery of womanhood through her relationship with men -- brother, son, lovers, husbands, mentors and friends.

The entire process of Angelou's self-exploration seems marked by the multiplicity of her identity. Although one may note an increasing convergence through the later autobiographies on the question of her femininity, one may also find that the autobiographer deals with this question by presenting a number of possibilities which accrue from the actual variety of roles she plays in life. Angelou examines these roles not only as distinct experiences but also as confused together,

overlapping and even co-existing with one another. Therefore, her sense of fragmentation and disorder dominates the narratives, undercutting drastically any continuity suggested by the broad, general sequentiality of the texts.

Even in her depictions of childhood, Angelou concentrates on the contradictions within her milieu, her own responses to them, and her halting inferences about herself in context. These conditions provide her with the opportunity to explore not only her childhood dilemma in confronting the multitude of social and psychological realities that constitute her world, but also elucidates her ways of striking a balance between the differences. Foregrounding her childhood alertness to multiple ways of seeing and responding to reality, Angelou contests a solidly established convention of rendering childhood as the most unified and idealistic phases of life. According to Susanna Egan, the essential characteristic of childhood autobiography is "innocence", revealing the influence of the Edenic myth on descriptions of childhood. The belief in the mediated oppositions of the story of creation with its basic emphasis on the inability to recognize fear, guilt, difference and transience often inspires a nostalgic retrieval of the lost garden of childhood; or it serves a more explicitly moral purpose in making the autobiographer assess his mature actions in relation to this ingenuous moment of his life. Whatever the effect on the autobiographer, depictions of childhood are most given to universalizations and, hence, to the Edenic state of enchantment:

> Paradise belongs to a divinely comic vision of the world in which nothing essentially changes. The myth, in its varying forms, sets up these

> oppositions and their mediating categories; it provides the primitive and childish explanations of the facts of life, its origins, and its end. Sex, birth, and death, however, cannot take place in Eden. They belong to the troubled, changing wilderness beyond the garden. Wilderness and garden represent the final polar opposites of the paradigm; wilderness belongs to the adults. Only children, green and golden, inhabit the garden: when they leave the garden, they leave their childhood behind (Egan, 70).

Contrary to that trend of childhood autobiography which situates the daily, yet complex, facts of life, such as "sex, birth, and death," in opposition to the enclosed garden of the child's consciousness, Angelou's childhood portraiture is cast in the framework of constant change. In her autobiography of childhood, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou deals primarily with her initial exposure to sexual, racial and class differences. Violence, sex and death all enter her life at an early age and leave their mark of dislocation. Angelou shows through such experiences that the boundaries between the wilderness and the garden are often blurred in the real world, especially for a black girl growing up in a rural Southern town in America during the thirties. Clearly, her purpose goes beyond mere nostalgia to become an active, ongoing confrontation with the multiple dimensions of her identity. Within Angelou's methodology, it is knowledge not "innocence" that enables her to make meaning of her past and present surroundings, to arrive at some understanding of the childhood and mature self.

Likewise, Angelou also contests another characteristic usually associated with childhood autobiography but carrying certain conceptual implications for autobiography in general. This is the tendency toward deliberate concealment, arising, as Brian Finney points out, from the

relation between felt experience and its re-evocation. The autobiographer usually suffers anxiety in having to repeat, through the act of self-construction, those childhood experiences that expose his vulnerability. Finney further explains that the autobiographer may often try to relieve this tension by unconscious recourse to idealization:

> Memories of childhood are most subject to unconscious censorship and alteration. The anxieties that all infants are said to experience give rise to a complicated succession of psychosocial defence mechanisms aimed at protecting the ego from threats to its pre-eminence. Consequently, the adult's view of childhood is invariably distorted in favour of the child's successes in dealing with threats to its needs and desires...Childhood autobiography, therefore, offers the writer the opportunity of winning public approval for this adult version of his early years. It offers him one more defence mechanism for combating the continuing threats to his ego (119).

The ultimate effect of succumbing to the demands of the ego is often a self-congratulatory piece of work that does not actually generate any truth about the self; it supplies, at best, an effective camouflage for the repressed sensibility. Angelou's childhood autobiography, as well as the subsequent volumes, takes quite a different direction. Choosing revelation over privacy, disjunction over unity, she successfully resists the veto of her ego and transforms its limiting influence into a self-challenging act. In describing painful experiences of her youth, such as her rape by her mother's boyfriend, her request for sexual intercourse with a boy she barely knows, her "peeing and crying" while running away from humiliation in the church, and her physical examination of her own body for signs of lesbian impulses, Angelou exchanges self-annihilation for self-examination. Instead of turning her

memories into means of disguise, she makes them function as windows to her current desires and fears. And therein lies her creativity.

Angelou explains that one reason for her candidness is her desire to recompense the young people on behalf of "those parents and non-parents who alike have lied about their past" (Tate, 9). Angelou corroborates this claim by concentrating on situations where she must confront her deviations from given absolutes of social, political and personal conduct. She is ever conscious of the burden of honesty. What is most important, Angelou claims, is being able to present the incidents in such a way that they embody and preserve the truth "in all its artistic forms" (Tate, 11). Through dealing honestly with them in her autobiography, she turns painful experiences into symbols of growth and revelation likely to inspire her young audience to an independence similar to her own.

With this audience in mind, Angelou presents the harrowing circumstances of her formative years as part of the general black American experience at the time. Toward the end of the first volume of her autobiography, she states that "the Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hatred and Black lack of power" (231). The specific social conditions pointed out by Angelou as bearing upon her childhood are neither occasional nor internal phenomena. They are attendant upon the first awakening of her senses and stretch over the entire experience of her childhood.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings owes its appeal to more than frankness, however. Angelou is a survivor, and out of her depiction of the bleak, threatening, ambiguous circumstances of her youth, she emerges as a character capable of growth even in the most restricting conditions. In a way she becomes an escape artist capable of maintaining and eventually extricating her developing self from the various traps into which she falls in the process of growing up. The first autobiography introduces Angelou's emphasis on the multi-dimensional self with its array of possibilities, a self sustained throughout the series by the absence of clinchers. In her life and in her writing, she resists the limitations imposed by definitions and pat conclusions. For example, Angelou closes the first volume with an ambivalent silence about the birth of her child. She is only fifteen years old then and fully dependent upon her parents. Under these circumstances, her silence could mean both detachment and an understanding of the seriousness of her situation. When Angelou's mother expresses confidence in her daughter's ability to look after her child, Angelou records her response as simply the following: "I patted my son's body lightly and went back to sleep" (CB, 246). No decisions are taken, no revelations are catalogued, and no resolution brought about regarding the doubts that have lately filled her mind. Even though the autobiographer writes from a moment of relative certainty regarding her attitude towards this significant change in her life, possessing actual knowledge of how things have shaped for her as a young mother, she avoids conveying a sense of conclusiveness in dealing with her past. She is constantly aware of the constructedness of her subjectivity and that awareness leads her to focus on the tentative process of growth, rather than

defining herself at points along the way.

In the absence of definitions, Angelou conveys the complexities involved in the reconstruction of her identity through the symbolic device of names that become metaphors for the roles she assumes. Born Marguerite Johnson, Angelou is commonly known as Rita. Usually she is her mother's "baby," although on more intimate and serious occasions she is "Ritie" or "young lady." To her brother she is "My"; to Momma, "Sister"; to her white mistress, "Mary"; to Curly, "Reet"; and to the deceitful pimp L. D. Tolbrook, "Bobby Sock Baby." Signifying the psychic and social oscillations that she goes through, the names evoke both warm and fearful memories. By naming her, the others establish a specific mode of communication with her. At first, Angelou accepts the roles that come with the names; either out of habit or attracted by newness, she lives out the expectations of others. But with time, she begins to discover the true nature of the relationship behind the name, to decipher conflict in apparent harmony, and to recognize the need for disruption in order to allow herself the freedom to grow. The closer Angelou moves toward ascertaining her own demands from others, the lesser becomes the definitive power of the names. In the last autobiography, she conjectures happily that she might be like Baldwin's hero in Nobody Knows My Name (224). Nobody knows her actual name either, and this enables her to retain the power of choosing when and how she will rend her mask of compliance and declare her independence.

In the South, Angelou learns to hide her proud spirit in the established manner of her family and the black community as a whole, but the scenario changes completely with Angelou's move to San Francisco.

Here, her rebellious spirit is bolstered by what appears to be a code of resistance to acts of injustice. She feels proud to belong to a family where her uncles were well-known young men who "beat up Whites and Blacks with the same abandon" (CB, 56), her mother was powerful and "unflinchingly honest" (CB, 174) and Grandmother Baxter, the owner and controller of gambling parlours, could "deal with even the lowest crook without fear" (CB, 51). But even in this "safe" place, Angelou experiences displacement and needs to find refuge in her world of fantasy. Most shockingly, in this "safe" place, she is raped by her mother's friend. The mixture of cohesiveness, aggression and warmth that the autobiographer sees in a microcosm of urban black life immediately preceding the Second World War suggests a peculiar balance that is mostly reactive. It serves as a mechanism for not only surviving the daily fears of the black community during this critical period, but also for transmitting an appearance of invincibility.

Neither the silent endurance of her rural surroundings nor the fragile balance of her urban home can offer Angelou a complete sense of identity. In her deepest self, she feels detached from both, and in consequence immerses herself imaginatively in the social flux of the time. The external whirlpool of fears, animosities, opportunism, and displacement of wartime America seems to mirror her own alienation as well:

> The air of collective displacement, the impermanence of life in wartime and the gauche personalities of the more recent arrivals tended to dissipate my own sense of not belonging. In San Francisco, for the first time I perceived myself as part of something. Not that I identified with the newcomers, nor with the rare Black descendents of native San Franciscans, nor

> with the whites or even the Asians, but rather with the times and the city. I understood the arrogance of the young sailors who marched the streets in marauding gangs... The undertone of fear that San Francisco would be bombed which was abetted by weekly air raid warnings, and civil defense drills in school, heightened my sense of belonging (CB, 179).

The state of flux that Angelou witnesses matches, as Sidonie Smith points out, "the fluidity of her physical, psychological, and intellectual life. She feels in place in an environment where everyone and everything seem out of place" (Where I am Bound, 132). In the second autobiography this search for fluidity is greatly intensified, and the influence of the family becomes abstracted to a means of nostalgic reconnection with the familiar sounds and colours of the past. By the third, the family is almost totally absent. In the fourth, Angelou revives a sense of belonging through the setting up of her own family with Guy and Vus which soon collapses and she is flung once more into a disjunctive state of being.

The disruption that Angelou experiences within her family and community also informs her relationships with men. Writing herself more and more as a woman from the second volume onward and concentrating on discovering the various ways in which her conceptions of gender difference have been shaped, Angelou comes to understand how her appreciation of her own body has been conditioned by the male gaze in her early adolescence. At a very young age, she has been convulsively awakened to the pressures on her female body, which in retrospect appears to her as a territory over which men have for long enacted their power to determine their right to evaluate and judge her:

> Boys seem to think that girls hold the keys to all happiness, because the female is supposed to have the right of consent and/or dissent. I've heard old men reflect on their youth, and an edge of hostile envy drags across their voices as they conjure up the girls who whetted but didn't satisfy their sexual appetites. It's interesting that they didn't realize in those yearning days past, nor even in the present days of understanding, that if the female had the right to decide, she suffered from her inability to instigate. That is, she could only say yes or no if she was asked.
>
> She spends half her time making herself attractive to men, and the other half trying to divine which of the attracted are serious enough to marry her, and which wish to ram her against the nearest wall and jab into her recklessly, then leave her leaning, legs trembling, cold wet evidence running down her inner thigh. Which one will come to her again, proud to take her to his friends, and which will have friends who only know of her as the easy girl with good (or even bad) poontang?
>
> The crushing insecurity of youth, and the built-in suspicion between the sexes, militate against the survival of the species, and yet... the whole process remains in process.
>
> Alas (GT, 119).

This passage also shows Angelou trying to target her anger and cynicism. She recalls the naivete of young boys who believed that girls had the power to express their sexuality as they desired. The institution of courtship and marriage so arranges it that the illusion of women's power of choice is preserved through the innocent aggression of adolescence. But somewhere along the path to maturity, the initiation into stereotypical sex roles takes place with a conviction that metamorphoses whatever enchantment there was in early youth between the sexes into a relationship of suppressed antagonism. The flat, resigned tone of the last word "Alas" suggests the autobiographer's inability to sustain the

anger because she sees herself as part of the process that keeps the inequalities and the suspicions alive.

Each of Angelou's romantic relationships is tragically cut short, not because of the men's infidelity towards her, but because of their commitment to their "own" women. Angelou, the single mother, alone and self-supporting, remains the "other" woman and, as such, is depreciated to an object of sexual pleasure only. The autobiographer shows how the politics of sexual stereotyping operate in permitting men to first categorize her as a particular kind of woman, and then to satisfy their needs without jeopardizing their "honourable" status which in turn rests upon their partnership with another type of woman. When Angelou falls in love with Curly, for example, she begins to dream of a life with him, free of mutual suspicion. Her every hope of happiness revolves around him. Curly involves himself with Maya only as deeply and for as long as he wants to and then leaves her with impunity for the girlfriend he was supposed to marry. At the time, Angelou's sense of self is still so much rooted in unqualified connection that she feels no anger against Curly, only a sense of immense loss. On another occasion, she receives assistance from R. L. Poole, a professional tap-dancer, to enter into the world of show-business. Poole limits his sexual demands to "monthly requests for love-making," and promptly rejects her when his pretty and successful ex-girlfriend comes to town. Once again Angelou "gave in to sadness because [she] had no other choice" (GT, 116). The third and most humiliating among her series of experiences with love comes from her complete immersion in the deceitful pimp L. D. Tolbrook, who manipulates her into prostitution in the name of performing a labour of love for

him. When his plans for exploiting her go awry, Tolbrook drops his mask to reveal his double deception:

> "Let me pull your coat, you silly bitch. This is my house. No 'ho goes to a man's house. You talked to my wife. No 'ho opens her mouth to speak to a man's wife." He curled his mouth and snarled. "Clara's never even met my wife and Clara's been my woman three years" (GT, 160).

In each of the three cases, Angelou expresses nothing more than the pain of loss. Even in retrospect, she resists indulging in accusatory monologues, but she nonetheless makes a strong statement against the opportunism of male power by stressing her need for love and the vulnerability that results from it.

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that while Angelou chooses to explore the most painful experiences of her female consciousness, which naturally brings into the picture some very exploitative gender relations, she shows no hatred of men in general. True to her multiple perspective and her non-hegemonic personality, she finds some of her finest sources of inspiration in men. Significantly, the men Angelou admires are the ones in whom the black humanistic tradition survives most strongly despite the odds against it.

One of the persons who counteracts quite powerfully the "macho, underworld" type of black men is Angelou's brother Bailey. His unpretentious attitude towards women reveals a genuinely compassionate nature and an understanding of the biases behind stereotypical assumptions about female sexual behaviour:

> "Bailey, you are not going to pimp, are you?"

> "Let me straighten you out. Pimps are men who hate women or fear them. I respect women, and how can I fear a woman when the baddest one I ever heard of is my mother?"
>
> He looked at me sharply. "And let me tell you another thing, a whore is the saddest and silliest broad walking. All she hopes is to beat somebody out of something, by lying down first and getting up last" (GT, 165).

On every occasion that Maya looks to him for guidance Bailey responds with deep insight into her actual and unspoken self. Whether it is to support Maya's spirited journey to Los Angeles, or to force her to regain her freedom from drug-dealers, Bailey consistently renews her sense of dignity and self-respect.

In the second book, Troubadour Martin emerges in a symbolically extended story about Bailey. Martin's desire, in the face of his own disintegration, to protect all that can still be nurtured in others is the kind of humanism that gives Maya confidence in her belief that the black race will never degenerate totally into an oppressive community. In addition to shielding Maya from the self-destructive life of the underworld, Martin wants to awaken her to its ugliness. Using himself as a learning tool, he takes the narcotic and forces her to watch the transformation that takes place:

> "Now, you want some?" Slow lips, slow question.
>
> "No."
>
> "You sure? I can cook up for you." His head lolled, but he kept his eyes on me.
>
> "I'm sure. I don't want it."
>
> "Then I want you to promise me you won't use shit. That's why they call it shit... You a

nice lady, Rita. I don't want to see you change ..."

> I thought about the kindness of the man. I had wanted him before for the security I thought he'd give me. I loved him as he slouched, nodding, his mouth open and the saliva sliding down his chin... no one had ever cared for me so much. He had exposed himself to teach me a lesson and I learned it as I sat in the dark car inhaling the odors of the wharf (GT, 180).

Troubadour Martin's powerful lesson takes the form, in Maya's consciousness, of a tremendous pride and hope that can only be expressed in the abstraction: "I had given a promise and found my innocence" (GT, 181).

Later, Angelou finds another friend and supporter in David DuBois, the Cairo-based black American journalist. DuBois' attractiveness lies, not only in his reliability, but also in his essential humanism. Like the intelligent slave who often masked his independent spirit in order to survive, David uses persuasiveness, wit and impersonation to make Maya's husband yield to her wishes. By masking his abhorrence for the established rules of female conduct in Egypt, by soothing the hostility of Vus and Maya's male colleagues, he is able to secure for her in the antagonistic environment the opportunity to free herself in a limited way from the marital stagnation in which she is locked.

With the last autobiography, Angelou begins to draw the most cogent connections between the gaps in the network of her aspirations and her repeated adherence to the expectations of femininity. It becomes nearly impossible for her to fulfil the customary roles of mother and wife and be an adventurous writer and performer as well. She feels

compelled to disengage herself from one to meet the requirements of the other. In her eagerness to excel at her domestic duties she sacrifices her authentic self, her need for expression and her desire for finer and more productive work than the household chores she performs so devotedly. Her meticulous housekeeping alienates her from her artist friends:

> Each meal at home was a culinary creation. Chicken Kiev and feijoda, Eggs Benedict and Turkey Tetrazzini.
>
> A good woman put ironed sheets on the beds and matched the toilet paper to the color of the bathroom tile.
>
> I was unemployed but I had never worked so hard in all my life. Monday nights at the Harlem Writers Guild challenged my control. Heavy lids closed my eyes and the best reading of the best writing could not hold my exhausted attention.
>
> "A bride, you know." Everybody would laugh...
>
> "That African's got her jumping." Hands clapped at the humor of it all. But they were speaking more truth than they knew. When I wasn't home tired I was as tired as a fist balled up in anger. My nerves were like soldiers on dress parade, sharp, erect and at attention (HW, 141).

Male domination is an obvious impediment to the free unfolding of her identity, but the unstated result is more complex than that. Such expectations as men have of her effect a split in her personality. One part of Angelou flees to the territory of uninhibited, inspired self-expression through dance, music, poetry and political activity; the other part clings greedily to a the social advantage of being identified with a husband, of being legitimized through him as a "somebody", even at the cost of surrendering parts of that aspired territory.

Angelou conveys the unsettling impact of her fractured relationships through the conscious artistic choice of discontinuity and rewriting. Although the narratives fall within a broad time sequence, each starts with a new context and almost without any direct linkage to the previous one. This device provides a means of breaking with dominant order in art as much as in life. It projects her sense of struggle against the "proper" and "safe" code of behaviour pertaining to the two elements of her identity - socio-cultural and sexual. The struggle occurs on several levels: against white arrogance and white standards of beauty and decency, against the implicit resignation and blindness in black people's religious beliefs and practices, against male tyranny, against all kinds of limits placed on her freedom of self-discovery. This multi-oppositional stance has shaped most twentieth-century women's narrative, where rupture itself is the expression of dissent:

> When a female writer is black (Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison), colonial (Olive Shreiner, Doris Lessing, Jean Rhys), Canadian (Margaret Atwood), of working-class origin (Tillie Olsen, Marge Piercy), of lesbian or bisexual orientation (H. D., Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Joanna Russ), or displaced and declasse' (Dorothy Richardson), double marginalization can be produced. Either it compels the person to negate any possibility for a critical stance..., or it enlivens the potential for critique by the production of an (ambiguously) nonhegemonic person, one in marginalized dialogue with the orders she may also affirm (Blau Duplessis, 33).

The authenticating centre of Angelou's experiences contains the very basis of dissension. "I was born as a human being, born as a black, and born as a female... these three things I **am**... I have to speak with my <u>own</u> voice," she tells Cheryl Wall (Wall, 66). Angelou's "own voice"

echoes all the above-mentioned sources of marginalization. For, indeed, her femaleness, her blackness and her free spirit have launched her outside the dominant discourses of culture and politics. And as Angelou goes to great lengths to show, not always has she been able to dissociate herself from the mechanisms of domination. Time and again she has re-initiated the process of her denial by her immediate urge for connection. The narrative discontinuities thus parallel the autobiographer's attempts to deal with the disruptive growth of her subjectivity.

As temporal and spatial distance between the autobiographical and the writing self diminishes, the narratives, in spite of the breaks, become more concentrated and forceful. The spontaneity of The Caged Bird is sacrificed to the motives of clarifying and sharpening important details of the ground Angelou stands on. This does not necessarily narrow her peripheral vision. While by the time she writes The Heart of a Woman she is more capable of penetrating the core of her womanhood and discovering the sources of security or insecurity within it, she does so without minimizing the "narrow space of black powerlessness." In her first two autobiographies Angelou illuminates adequately the deep fears and hopelessness of her race, but she refuses to submerge the cause of repeated damage to her dreams in the men's victimization and sexism. Angelou writes the final phase of her continuous autobiography with a view to defining the "enclosure" in which black women "experience their deepest and most permanent scars, for it is here that they are in conflict, not with a white-controlled system, but with black men who shatter their dreams of love and acceptance" (Wade-Gayles, 223).

In addition to breaking the narrative sequence of her continuous autobiography, Angelou also employs changes in voice to reconstruct the impact of rupture in life. The autobiographer's voice is distinct in each narrative, and she refrains from giving any premature revelations of forthcoming intellectual and emotional developments, preferring instead to reflect the mutedness, confusion or conviction, as the case maybe, of each separate phase of her life. In the second volume, for example, which records one of the most difficult and impressionable periods of her life, Angelou infuses the autobiographical voice with all the passion and optimism of youth:

> I decided I'd try to sort out my life. I tried to crush the thoughts of self-pity that needled into my brain and told myself that it was time to roll up my costumes, which would eternally have the odor of grease paint n their seams, and put away the tapshoes, which hurt my feet anyway. For, after all, only poets care about what happened to the snows of yesteryear. And I hadn't time to be a poet, I had to find a job, get my grits together and take care of my son. So much for show biz, I was off to live real life (GT, 117).

There is no place for retreat or self-chastisement in the young girl's sense of disappointment. Hence, her subsequent mistreatment at the hands of Tolbrook, Vus Make, and others after this proud announcement becomes all the more ironic. The slightest interjection on the part of the mature narrator about the young girl's future realization that "real" life was everywhere, even in the petty rivalries of show-business, would mar the reader's involvement in the present events of the narrative. Angelou ensures the participation of her audience by linking the essential characteristics of voice to the prevailing nature of her experiences. She, thus, heightens the effect of disorientation resulting

from the repeated conflicts between her own and other's perception of her identity.

The autobiographical voice of the third segment, Singin' and Swingin', carries strong overtones of irony and self-directed laughter. Because the reader of the previous books has been sufficiently acquainted with Angelou's numerous disillusionments, her use of cliches to render her marital bliss conspicuously reveals both the ambiguity in her earlier perception of self-reliance and her awareness as she writes of its limitations:

> Tosh was a better husband than I had dared to dream. He was intelligent, kind and reliable. He told me I was beautiful (I decided that he was blinded by my color) and a brilliant conversationalist. Conversation was easy. He brought flowers for me and held my hand in the living room. My cooking received his highest praise and he laughed at my wit (SS, 27).

The tone of complacency contrasts with the nature of events that follow in rapid progression and culminate in the admission that "When the marriage ended completely ..., I was a saner, healthier person" (SS, 42). With the third autobiography, Angelou's relationships with men become secondary to the development of her professional and social self. She juxtaposes the short, intense account of her marriage to Tosh with a longer and more extensive one of her rise to stardom. By placing her stories in such a way as to urge comparison and contrast, she sets up a form of dialogue between the different principles of her identity. The dialogue is never conclusive, but she continues to reassess her attitude on marriage, motherhood and other forms of relationship on the basis of new perspectives on freedom and wholeness.

The voice of The Heart gives expression to the complexity of this stage in Angelou's life. With her active involvement in the political, cultural and literary associations of black Americans, she begins to understand that she needs conviction to make any of her actions meaningful. Her relationship with Vus Make, the African activist, plunges her into a totally new context of self-examination for which even the wide range of her experiences has not prepared her. She suddenly finds that she must be able to define herself politically in order to know who she really is. And to do that she has to decide how she feels about such matters as Malcolm X's speech on black militancy and the assassination of Patrice Lumumba by the Belgians. She must also decide if she wants to be a good African bride or an Afro-American working mother with a sixteen-year-old son to bring up. She must respond to Jean Genet's suggestion in The Blacks that colonialism would crumble, but the oppressed would find that they had exchanged one master for another. All these questions literally come home to Angelou and must be answered before she can understand the true nature of her commitment to her black South African husband, her son, and her own creativity.

Angelou's difficulty with finding her political self is augmented greatly by the contradictions she perceives between political belief and every day reality. The husband who exhorts her to be vigilantly on guard against all forms of domination does not hesitate to assert his own superiority over her. He patronizes her as if she "were the little shepherd girl and he the old man of Kilimanjaro" (175). Angelou also realizes the power of cultural values over political ones when she sees how much Make is able to influence Guy whose attitude towards her

undergoes a marked change. He begins to acquire some of the "maleness" of his stepfather. The two men "sat together, laughing, talking and playing chess" and treating her "as if [she] were the kind and competent family retainer" (187). The autobiographical voice conveys the felt anger generated by her effacement. However, the anger, this time, turns more outward than inward. Although Angelou concludes the narrative with a characteristically self-diminutive version of her newly acquired freedom, comparing it to the feeling of being permitted finally "to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by [herself]" (272), she has enough confidence in her own ability to locate her selfhood. Her decision to leave Vus and at the same time remain in Africa to taste the fruits of black nationalism demonstrates her preparedness now to shape her life according to a more developed female perspective.

The control of the narrative voice by the presence or absence of authorial summarization and variations in tonal inflexions brings alive the process of change in Angelou's rewritten autobiographies. The four volumes contain such diverse material that, in order to avoid superimposing a fictional unity and narratorial omniscience over them, the autobiographer speaks in a divided voice reflecting the respective atmosphere and shapes of the mind operating in it. This is all the more necessary because the separate texts are meant to convey the vital segments of her experience as distinct units and reflect the immediacy and vitality of each phase of development. Angelou shows her concern with voice in autobiography in an interview given to Carol Neubauer:

> Neubauer: And so when you say you look for a new voice you don't mean the voice of the present or the time of writing the autobiographical account, but rather of that period of your past.

That must be difficult.

Angelou: Very. Very difficult, but I think that in writing autobiography that's what is necessary to really move it from "as told to" to an "as remembered" state. And really for it to be a creative and artistic literary art form. I believe I came close to creating the voice in Gather Together of that young girl - eratic, sporadic, fractured...

Neubauer: It seemed that in The Heart of a Woman, either the voice was more complex or else there was more than one voice at work. There seemed to be the voice of that time in your life and yet another voice commenting on that time.

Angelou: It seems so, but I looked at that quite carefully and at the period I think it is the voice because I was really coming into a security about who I was and what I was about, but the security lasted sometimes for three or four days...It would be like smoke in a room ...I tried very hard for the voice. I remember the woman very well (Massachusetts Review 28(1987), 266-67).

Each of Angelou's autobiographies has required more than one voice to convey her situation adequately. And not all of these voices belong to her. While speaking in different voices herself, Angelou also allows the other characters in her autobiographies to speak in their individual voices. As a result, the focus of narration shifts from the subjective presence of the autobiographer to the objective conditions of her consciousness. In this respect, The Heart is somewhat different from the other narratives because here the autobiographer's voice emerges strongest. While the peripheral concern is still strong, Angelou seems to have come to terms more fully and securely with her self and seems more interested in giving expression to it through a voice she can call her own.

Although the primary function of voice change in the autobiographies is to retrace the process by which the autobiographer acquires her authentic voice, Angelou does not completely bury her narrating consciousness and its accompanying voice in the process. In fact she uses it to provide some of the sharpest commentaries on the ambiguities in her awareness of self. In Gather Together, she is seen caught in a difficult struggle to retain her adolescence under the persuasive pressures of expected motherhood/womanhood. "You are a woman. You can make up your mind," her mother tells her (GT, 23). Her relatives persistently remind her of her new role, which presupposes a complete re-orientation of lifestyle:

> "Reetie, you are a woman now. A mother and all that. You'll have to get a job -"
> "I've been working as a cook." She shouldn't think I had come to be taken care of.
> "- and learn to save your money" (GT, 27).

The family obviously is "not equipped to understand that an eighteen-year-old mother is also an eighteen-year-old girl" (GT, 27). Their exhortations to her to conduct herself like a mother do not take into consideration the possibility that she might want to experience motherhood differently from them, or that she might have the need for a different kind of space for herself. However, the assumptions her family imposes upon her are powerful despite their inappropriateness to her particular situation. Through their harsh exterior, a mark of years of struggle to build a solid, respectable, middle-class Negro life, her relatives also expose to Angelou her brand of romanticism. While posing a threat to her uniqueness, they bring under direct self-scrutiny the images of her individuality, images she had concocted from stereotypical

Hollywood models:

> I had written a juicy melodrama in which I was to be the star. Pathetic, poignant, isolated. I planned to drift out of the wings, a little girl martyr. It just so happened that life took my script away and upstaged me (GT, 28).

The note of self-criticism incorporated into the narrator's defiance of her familial expectations heightens the process of self-analysis. Racism has contributed to the nervous pre-occupation of Negroes with economic stability, their notions of strength and success, but so has mainstream sexist culture given Angelou her dreams of being immortalized through womanly silence and self-sacrifice.

A more problematic situation in the context of Angelou's experiments with voice is created by her account about the lesbians, Johnnie Mae and Beatrice. At first, Angelou's description of her quandary at the house of her new acquaintances seems loaded with self-pity. She has to endure the lovers' uninhibited display of intimacy as well as her fears of being raped by them. She is, however, able to maintain an amicable exterior because, as she claims, she has a "big generous unprejudiced spirit which ... got [her] hooked up with two lesbians of heavy humor" (GT, 40). When the centre of focus gradually shifts from Angelou to the two women, the ironic dimensions of the the narration begin to surface. Johnnie Mae and Beatrice explain that they are facing eviction from their home because the landlord's son is "a faggot...so the old bastard can't stand gay people" (GT, 42). With this knowledge, Angelou, in accordance with her "generous spirit," can feel only pity for them. She fails to see her own prejudices and the inadequacy of her kindness, both of which are proved by her sudden

recollection of her first lover: "I thought about Curly and did in fact feel sorry for the two women" (GT, 42). Maya thinks about Curly, not only as a nostalgic rewinding of her broken dreams for a "honeymoon cottage" like that of Johnnie Mae and Beatrice, but also because she herself subscribes to the notion that lesbianism is a disappointed retaliation against men. Implicit in her sympathy is the belief that had the women known someone like Curly they could not have found anything erotic in each other. Finally, Maya's disrespect for the lesbians, whom she cannot understand as anything but "queer," is most fully exposed in her plans to exploit them while thinking of them as "sinful... inconsiderate, stupid bitches" (GT, 43). Angelou makes no attempt to temper the voice of the autobiographical subject with feelings of remorse or guilt. By laying it open in all its contradictions, she voices the inconsistencies and limitations of her own social viewpoints.

Angelou's autobiographies challenge a number of "given scripts," most of which concern the black female stereotypes. Momma Henderson, at first glance, fits quite easily the stereotype of the Black American Matriarch, the powerful Earth Mother, the ever-enduring Dilseys and Aunt Mehitables. These figures have traditionally provided the most effective contrast to the ideal white woman who "could not be ornamental, descriptive, fussy, if she nursed and brought up children... men did not fight duels or protect the honour of a woman who was busy cooking, scrubbing floors or minding children" (Christian, 2). Angelou's grandmother is strong and nurturing. With all the resourcefulness of a typical black matriarch, she manages to keep the poor white children from wrecking her store, to protect her crippled son from the Klan by

hiding him in a vegetable bin, and to save her grandchildren from dangerous racial situations. Momma is indeed the dominant figure in the family. But, as Angelou shows, her powerful role devolves, not from emasculating tendencies, but from the actual absence of adult males who could undertake responsibility. One of her sons is physically disabled and the other a glamorous nomad. Anne Henderson resists subjugation as far as her physical and mental strength allows; she yields where every black woman in the South has yielded for a long time. As a child, Angelou finds it hard to believe that her grandmother might accept defeat. In fact, her faith in the old woman's invincibility is one of her most precious fantasies. When a white dentist refuses to administer medical aid to Maya, saying that he would "rather stick [his] hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (BS, 160), Maya promptly creates an imaginary version of her grandmother. She invests this new personality with mysterious powers, and through her enables a reversal in the existing social divisions. The dentist is reduced to a snivelling, sorrowful creature; the nurse is turned into a sack of chickenfeed. Of course, all that really happens is that Anne Henderson takes her granddaughter to a black dentist. With this bifurcated depiction of her grandmother, as fantasy and reality, Angelou strikes at the root of images of matriarchy associated with older black women. Matriarchy denotes a position of power which, in reality, no black woman has secured -- at least not in Momma Henderson's time.

Angelou's portrayal of her mother as the spirit of non-compliant black womanhood and as a great impact on her own life is another corrective to the images of black women. To describe her "would be to

write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow" (CB, 58). With firm command, sometimes violence, Vivian Baxter withstands her obstacles. She teaches her daughter to overcome sentimentality and never let anything constrict her self-esteem:

> "People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women...But you remember this, now. Your mother raised you. You are full-grown. Let them catch it like they find it. If you haven't been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping." Here a whisper of delight crossed over her face. "Stepping. But not on you" (GT, 108).

It is a fierce struggle that Vivian Baxter is involved in. Her efforts at fighting off economic uncertainties, male domination and insecurity singlehandedly are made all the more difficult by her almost complete non-adherence to the accepted code of behaviour. Unlike Momma she does not "pray her tribulations to a manageable size" (GT, 154). Nevertheless, the intensity with which she protects her independence and the absence of enduring bonds take their toll on her too. The result is "a long internal burning usually terminating in self-destroying implosion" (GT, 5). When Angelou begins her own precarious struggle, she learns to see more in her mother than the idealized heroine of her childhood. She notes with sadness that the "pretty face had lost its carefree adornment and her smile no longer made me think of day breaking" (GT, 24).

As these women from the past return again and again in Angelou's narratives, she both accepts and repudiates their hold over her. What she accepts is the "explorative revelation that she is because her life

is an inextricable part of the misunderstood reality of who Black people and Black women truly are. That self is the model she holds before Black women and that is the unheralded chronicle of actualization which she wants to include in the canon of Black literature" (O' Neal, Black Women Writers, 26). What she repudiates, or at least attempts to, is the effacement of many women like her mother and grandmother. Angelou notes, with anger and anguish, that some women have depended solely on divine retribution. Their moans, like her grandmother's, are terrifying to her: "Bread of Heavens, Bread of Heavens, feed me till I want no more" (HW, 257). She likewise cannot accept the defensive individualism of her mother. Vivian Baxter's victories against discrimination are impressive, but she too must subsume her identity in the desperate race toward accomplishing white standards of respectability.

Interestingly, none of the female figures in the narrative transcends her social circumstances fully. Their stories are not success stories. And, neither is Angelou's own. She could have written her autobiographies as a writer whose books have sold in thousands, as an exemplary American citizen who has risen from the debilitation of mediocre black life to become an extraordinary human being. But those are exactly the images that Angelou repudiates as variations on the general effacement of black women. In going back repeatedly to her historical female self, she attempts to remove the mask that black women have been made to wear. By revealing black women from the inside, she defines the cultural criteria for writings about and for them and thus upholds their struggle against effacement and oversimplification.

Angelou's representations of her paternal grandmother and her mother are part of the process of understanding her evolving self, "which cannot be divorced from the history of that self or the history of the people among whom it took shape" (Fox-Genovese, The Private Self, 83). The two women, so different from one another, constitute a vital part of her history, and she traces the nature and conditions of these people in order to achieve a synthesis on a new plane of personal and collective consciousness. Angelou summarizes the categorization of black women thus: "Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes sister, Pretty Baby, Aunty, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her even to herself" (quoted in Harris, 4). The act of writing the self, for black female authors, is tantamount to being reborn from shattered images and silences.

Adrienne Rich, in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," describes the journey by women writers into the past as an awakening experience, albeit a painful and disorienting one:

> Revision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves...We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it, not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us (On Lies, Secrets and Silences, 35).

But commiting oneself to the task of unmasking the ideologies behind

assumptions through the creative act of self-representation is particularly problematic. Often the autobiographer herself is motivated by "cultural expectations, habits, and systems of interpretations pressing on her at the scene of writing" (Smith, A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, 47). Her position becomes even more complex when she is a member of a minority race or community; then she must negotiate not one or two, but multiple forms of selfhood identified with class, race, nationality and sex. It is not surprising then that Angelou's autobiographies, inspite of her desired objective of telling her stories with complete candour, constantly reveal the tension between revelation and restraint.

In telling her story and that of others, Angelou is rebelling against her painful experience with the constriction of utterance. In The Caged Bird, silence is a manifestation of her inability to understand her own sexuality. For example, it is not so much Mr. Freeman's threats of killing Bailey if she speaks out, as it is her own role in the rape that perplexes Angelou. She cannot tell the truth about being touched by Mr. Freeman before the fatal incident without acknowledging that she had loved his closeness, "felt at home" with him, and believed him for that moment to be her "real father." Such a revelation would only bring her social condemnation. One critic calls Angelou's self-silencing a form of death (Arensberg, 286). Indeed, at the trial, the foreboding shadow of death hovers over the courtroom. Maya's family sits still "on the seats like solid, cold gray tombstones" (CB, 70). When Maya cannot remember what Mr. Freeman was wearing when he raped her, his lawyer "snickered as if [she] had raped Mr. Freeman"

(70). Because Maya feels responsible for her predicament, she attempts to negate herself -- a situation that could easily lead to self-hatred. When Mr. Freeman is murdered, the young girl retreats entirely into mourning:

> I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey ... if I talked to anyone else that person may die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended (CB, 73).

The world of protective adults does not really have a place for the child's doubts about herself. In its bid to avenge her violation, the family overlooks her trauma. The overriding concern with establishing innocence silences Angelou because at that moment her deepest feelings are those of guilt and shame. Confronting this moment in her childhood through her autobiography is, in a sense, a healing process. She undertakes the exploration of silence in order to break its hold over her. Angelou describes many more sexual and psychological wounds in her rewritten autobiographies, each time moving closer and closer towards making the connections between social prescriptions and her own vision of her female identity.

It would be an oversimplification of the problem of silence, as dealt with by Angelou, to point only to its self-negating effects. The autobiographer shows that silence, at certain moments of crisis, can perform the function of speech. Like spoken language, it has its nuances, idioms and expressions. In the aftermath of her rape, silence envelops the young girl, keeps her inviolate. She needs silence in order

to restore herself from the effects of so many intrusions on her private world. It is the only way in which she can engage in an unmediated dialogue with self:

> I discovered that to achieve perfect silence all I had to do was attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. I walked into rooms where people were laughing... and I simply stood still in the riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds (CB, 73).

Silence is also a form of rebellion because the family does not permit it. When the child's reclusive behaviour extends beyond the doctor's pronouncement that she has been healed, she is called "impudent" and her silence "sullenness" (73). Her detachment is made all the more threatening to her family since it takes place in spite of her physical proximity to them. But, since she cannot achieve silence without negotiating its opposite, she gravitates all the more towards sound. The autobiographer herself adopts a somewhat similar method by rendering the silences of her life through words. In order to interpret her unconscious sensibilities and overcome her inscrutability, Angelou recreates in language the entire experience with wordlessness.

Autobiography, like the novel, may employ the strategy of "hidden texts" within a single one, or an alternative structure concealed within the explicit one. In autobiography, however, this strategy has especial bearing on the relation of the narrator to the facts of his/her life and the process of coming to be what he/she is. Angelou does not always trace in sharp, definitive lines her coming to consciousness as a woman,

nor does she bring to the surface all at once the various implications of her experiences. Underneath the presentness of the narrative her gradually unfolding identity acquires full exposure only when the separate texts are read as accretive platforms of self-revelation. This reading is difficult because growth continues and there can be no essential, ultimate self to retrieve from the maze of episodes.

Angelou's multi-faceted identity and its relation to the identities of other Black women, her treatment of the problems of autobiographical truth and responsibility, and her experiments with narrative voice, rupture and silence show the power of the autobiographical form not only to reflect but also to expand the vista of an individual's sense of self. The narratives take the reader through a multitude of screens, as it were, each providing a different angle on the entire setting and context of the main performing figures. One can see by the variety of perspectives and voices, by the recognition of half-told and untold stories that indeed there is enough material in those four segments to yield not only the autobiographies Angelou has written but even several wholly different ones.

Angelou incorporates many of those experiences that link her work to the beginnings of Afro-American autobiography. Separation from family, fear, and loneliness are her beginnings too; books and the knowledge they bring are private sources of nourishment; flight is an expression of courage and self-determination. But Angelou, of course, depicts all these aspects of her identity in the twentieth-century social and political climate of America. Whereas the slave narrator would find it difficult to portray a self without a well-elucidated

centre, Angelou's act of finding a centre ends with a conclusion that there are several centres in her self. She is, as she says, black, female and human, a condition that in the autobiographies does not appear to be an easy combination. Although Angelou's rewritten autobiographies make clear certain directions in the development of her choices, there is no sense of an ultimate configuration. Undoubtedly, her self-exploration converges on to her femaleness, but Angelou avoids enclosing the self in fixed and binding modes of reference. It is an ongoing activity and as the autobiographer herself claims, "the process has as its final end the realization, but you fall in love with the process" (Wall, 67).

IV

CONCLUSION

A tradition is at work here in the rewritten autobiographies of Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou. Although all aspects of that tradition are not represented by these autobiographies, certain central concerns and developments in the black American autobiographical tradition are discernible: the initiation into blackness, the transformation of personal memory into collective storytelling, the negotiation of personality through articulation of collective history, the recognition of the loci of self as situated in the ideologies operating in the larger social world, in the intersection of race and class perspectives, in the co-existence of African and American heritages in the Afro-American psyche, in the double jeopardy of black female experience, and the re-situation and re-construction of self with a view to these multiple angles of identity, autonomy and solidarity. This is a tradition Baldwin said would require still more words to articulate. The process continues to present in clearer and sharper forms the many contours of this tradition. In addition, the growing need to look beyond essential and unified conceptions of blackness and femininity is creating ever new and interesting grounds for study.

In the case of black writing in America, the autobiography has always been the most significant literary statement on the communal and individual self. From the early slave narratives onward, "the Afro-American situation imposed on the black mind certain essential relationships and arbitrations" (Arnold Rampersad, "Biography, Autobiography, and Afro-American Culture", The Yale Review, 73:1 (1983),

13). The two most important of these links have been between the black individual and the white world with all its mechanisms of domination, and between this individual and his/her own people. Among the forces that have stamped black autobiographies with a distinctive seal, the most important is the desire for freedom and social equality. These goals had the appearance of an obvious realization in the context of the slave narratives -- emancipation. Today, such issues evoke more questions than answers. Moreover, the onus of image-making has shifted from the oppressors to the oppressed. It is for the black people to create their own images of blackness, selfhood, freedom and humaneness. Hughes and Angelou, in this sense, contribute to that larger creative process.

The autobiographies of both writers are inscribed in various ways by their respective attitudes towards "cultured" society, black and white. Hughes actively resists literary elitism, not just through the symbolic act of throwing all his books into the sea, but by eschewing gaudy literary circles in favour of various means of contact with simple, ordinary folk. In fact, the often clipped, factual journalistic tone and language of his autobiographies, woven into strands of warm humour and occasionally personal revelations, is a way of resisting the contagion of alienated, self-indulgent intellectualism. Hughes's journeys teach him to admit difference without condescension and sentimentality, to avoid random appropriation of socio-cultural phenomena into an elevated vision of art. Hughes does not hesitate to show in his autobiography how his search for self entails some straightforward political choices. The Scottsboro case at home, racial

oppression in Haiti, colonial domination in China, the resistance war in Spain have shaped his poetry and his artistic consciousness; these national and international events have helped him decide where his commitments lie, and he has acknowledged his debt to the struggles of the people in his autobiographies.

Angelou's autobiographies explore her disillusionment with established cultural texts of the West, which comes in the wake of her realization that there exists an alternate stream of narrative that can tell her stories and those of her people. In this stream is included every narrator who has tried to give birth to his self and his race through the act of speaking the unspoken:

> Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or by empty pots made less tragic by your tales?
>
> If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survived in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers) (CB, 156).

The center of empowerment clearly shifts from her knowledge of "Beowulf" and "Oliver Twist" to an awareness of where her real sources of survival lie. So, although the love for "Hamlet's soliloquy" remains, Angelou's growing up is marked more distinctly by the imprints of race and gender than it is by her desire to gain access to the world represented by classical European texts. Angelou also comes to understand, through the most commonplace experiences, that white American culture and language

can imprison her into ways of constructing her identity which would eventually make her "rootless, nameless, pastless" (GT, 76).

Angelou's self-knowledge, like Hughes's, is mediated by connection. She finds that going outward is as important as journeying inward in the search for self. Angelou highlights her constant movements from city to city, country to country as part of her commitment to her family and herself. It is also through these connections that she becomes aware of the common bond she shares with black women or the race as a whole. At the same time, her participation in the dynamic forces of black religion, politics and literature reveals own desires and propensities. Hence, the odd variety of influences: the beauty and absurdity of the folk community, the blues-street tradition, black theatre, the call of Martin Luther King, Pan Africanism, the Harlem Writers Guild and so on. One of the most striking conclusions that Angelou arrives at is recorded in The Heart of a Woman where she decides that no option -- marriage, physical appeal, motherhood -- is as good as the trenchancy of her own conviction in what she does: " I made the decision to quit show business. Give up the skin-tight dresses and manicured smiles. The false concern over sentimental lyrics. I would never again work to make people smile inanely and would take on the responsibility of making them think" (45). That decision is her passport to freedom and assertion.

The autobiographies of Angelou and Hughes, separated by at least two decades, display certain strong similarities in the approach to self. The combined study of these autobiographies can thus be quite fruitful in analyzing some of the more enduring elements of the

Afro-American autobiographical tradition. Keeping in mind the diversities within the tradition, it can be said that the influence of social factors in the construction of self has remained the cornerstone of most Afro-American autobiography. In the more recent life narratives of Toni Morrison or Alice Walker one can still see the concentration upon socio-historical origins of self. Both Hughes and Angelou have tried through their narratives to respond to the world that has shaped them. In doing this they have also redefined their respective concepts of blackness, female beauty, fidelity, motherhood, heroism, the folk spirit, artistic excellence and literary responsibility. These historians of the self, by their commitment to the totality of experience, in all unities and disjunctions, have given us a more complete and vivid picture of their times than any social historian would.

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